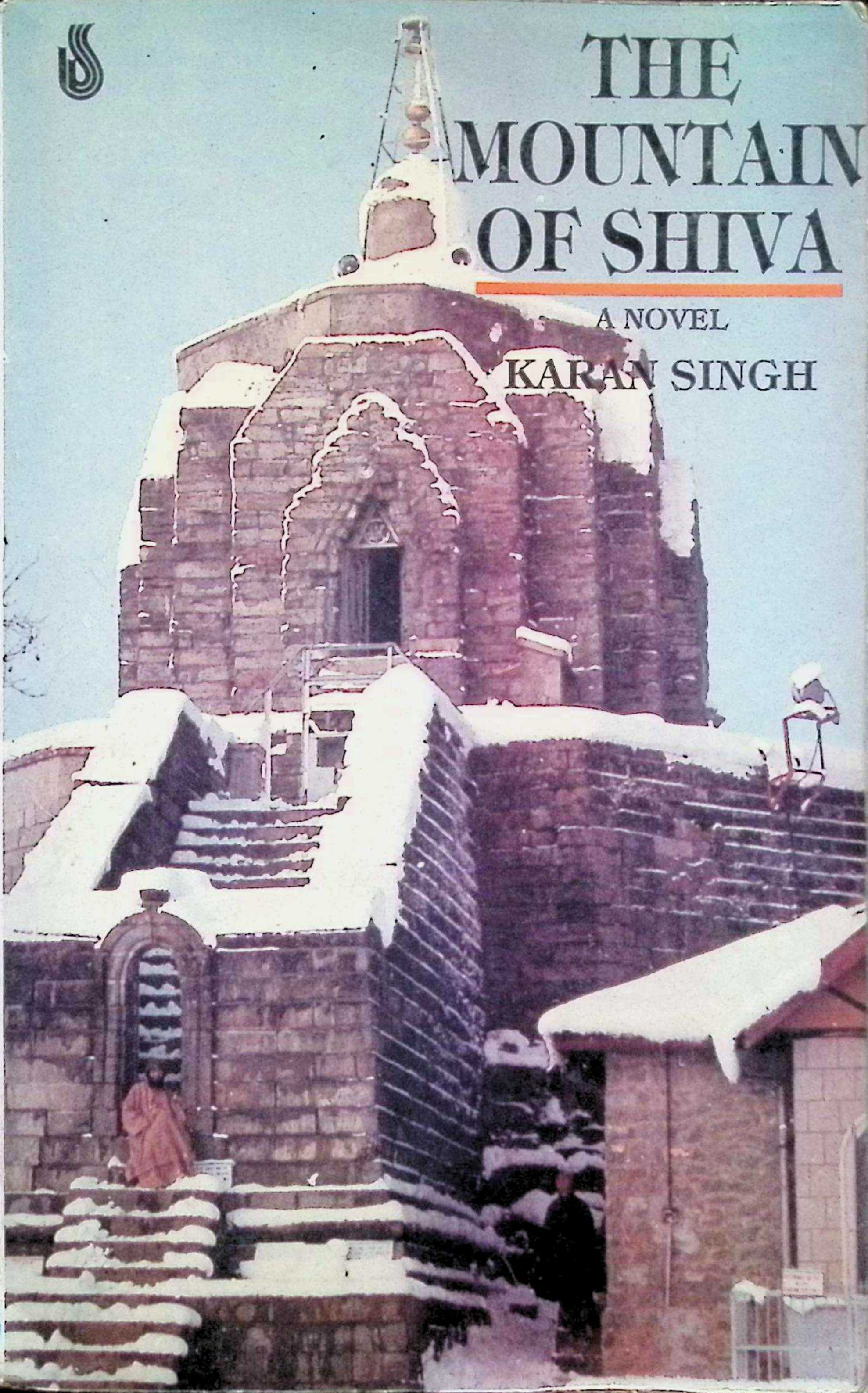
THE MOUNTAIN OF SHIVA

A NOVEL

KARAN SINGH



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Set in Kashmir, and dealing essentially with the spiritual quest, *The Mountain of Shiva* is not only a good story but has profound undertones which would be of great interest to the discerning reader. In spelling out Adi Sankara's philosophy as expressed in his works, a dialogue is introduced in the novel between a preceptor and an aspirant — "What is it that you seek?" "I seek to redeem the glowing promise of the Upanishads, to achieve the state where all sorrow and strife cease and where shines the eternal light of bliss and certitude." "You seek well. You seek what is your birthright," answers the master.

Dr. Karan Singh is known throughout India and the international community as a philosopher and writer, but his short and scintillating novel comes as a pleasant surprise. He is a noted scholar in Sanskrit and a patron of Indian culture and art treasures. A former Union Minister and ambassador to the United States, he has represented India at important international conferences.

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A Novel

KARAN SINGH

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Dedicated

To

"Maharaj"
ātmakrīḍa ātmarati kriyāvān
eṣa brahmvidāṃ variṣṭha

"Sporting in the Self, engrossed in the Self
Yet constantly engaged in action,
Such are the greatest among the knowers of Brahman."

Kaṭha Upanisad

1

Ashok sat back, letting himself go limp against the cushioning. He breathed slowly and rhythmically for a few minutes, until his mind and body began to partake of a smoother equilibrium, a more unhurried confrontation. He tried inwardly to stand aside, to see himself as if he were a complete stranger, to watch his thoughts ebb and flow, arise and subside. After a while he began framing the question "Who am I?", seeking to turn the searchlight of his thoughts inwards, to probe the depths of his being and discover the true centre of his consciousness. This was an exercise Swamiji had taught him several years ago, and it always gave Ashok a deepened inner poise, a curiously energising detachment that helped him face with greater confidence, the rush and bustle of life. Somehow, an air journey deepened his inner awareness. It was as if, in the clear atmosphere high above the scenario of daily living, he was able to see life in a more integrated perspective and come closer to that elusive realm of heightened consciousness that so far he had only been able vaguely to perceive in dreams and fragmentary recollections of early childhood.

The drone of the jet engines was soporific and reassuring. The plane was almost full except for two seats in the extreme rear, and the passengers included several foreigners—mostly Americans, thought Ashok, from their colourful bush-shirts and the inevitable cameras slung over their shoulders. Two little blond boys, about seven years old and ridiculously alike, occupied the seats across the aisle from Ashok. They kept getting up and whispering to a young couple—evidently their parents—seated in front of them. Ashok's seat was next to the window, and to his left was a small, dark, bespectacled man who was already absorbed in a paperback. Ashok glanced obliquely at the title, and gave a little start when he saw that it was *How to Win Friends and Influence People.* He remembered that at school twenty years ago he and Ramesh had read it together but in secret, because it was an accepted principle that whoever read that book would surely be the most unpopular boy of the term. Ashok pulled a book of his own out of his briefcase—*The Ochre Robe*, written by an Austrian who had become a Hindu monk. The publishers had cleverly splashed a close-up of the robe on the cover, so that the book itself was a striking shade of ochre. He opened it to where he had last left off reading, but Dale Carnegie had revived memories of long ago, making it impossible for him to concentrate on the book in his hands. His school days came flashing into Ashok's mind, the bittersweet recollections of a time when joy and sorrow wove a strange tapestry in his life. Above all, and still painful though two decades had elapsed, was the memory of Ramesh.

On the opening day at school, when the new boys were shivering with homesickness and apprehension, they had met for the first time. He still recalled vividly that first assembly, the Headmaster tall and forbidding, making a stentorian speech welcoming all the new boys to the "family of the school", "school" drawn out so that it acquired a distinctly sinister connotation. When the Headmaster strode in and ascended the platform he had looked so overwhelming that at least one new boy had failed to suppress a little gasp, which sent a titter of amusement through the assembly hall. Then the names of the new boys were read out, and as each name was called the boy had to step forward. It was, of course, sheer torture, but well-intentioned, the idea being that each boy was individually introduced and accepted as part of the corporate life of the school. "Number thirty-six, Ashok Singh, Ashok House." Ashok had stepped forward to a chorus of giggles. "Number thirty-seven, Ramesh Kapur, Ashok House."

From that inaugural day at school they became fast friends. They went through the usual first-term ragging and bullying together, deriving comfort from the fact that their misery was shared. They began the painful but exhilarating process of becoming part of a vitally pulsating institution, with its high academic standards and intense preoccupation with sports and physical fitness. Gradually they shed their shyness along with their body-fat, became adjusted to their new surroundings and began talking like other schoolboys. Despite the strict outward uniformity in dress and manner of speech, each boy soon began to develop his own distinctive potentialities. Ramesh grew to be a fine sportsman; even as a junior he made the school first eleven in hockey and was one of the fastest sprinters in his house. He also boxed for the school, swam like a fish, ran cross-country with credit and excelled in the gymnasium. His studies, however, were average, and he had some difficulty in getting through his examinations at the end of term.

Ashok was almost exactly the reverse. Introspective by nature, and somewhat averse to the physical rough and tumble of the sportsground, he was from his earliest days a good scholar. His form-master looked upon him as a model student, and his results seldom fell below third or fourth place in class. Sports and P.T. he had to do, no one in his school could possibly avoid them, but it was always with a measure of physical shrinking, almost revulsion. It was not that he was a coward; in fact, when pressed he could give evidence of unusual courage. It was just that temperamentally he was much happier browsing in the library or in the Music School. Music was his second love, his first being books, and he sang and played the flute with considerable ability.

This apparent difference between him and Ramesh only made their friendship more complete. Ashok would help Ramesh with his homework, specially sums and English essays, while Ramesh would instruct and encourage Ashok in the finer points of swimming and running. Their personalities dovetailed perfectly, and as they grew older their friendship steadily grew deeper. Ashok used to be an invariable spectator whenever Ramesh was performing in an athletics or sports event, while Ramesh never missed the debating society when Ashok was speaking, or a concert in which he participated. They spent as much time together as they could manage, and found in each other's company a joy that neither experienced with anyone else.

Although Ramesh was a Punjabi, his father, a senior officer of the Indian Civil Service, was for several years posted at Calcutta and it was there that he went during his holidays. Ashok's father had been in the army, and as his postings were erratic Ashok was never sure where he would have to spend his holidays. His home was in Pradhanpur, a small town in the foothills of the Himalayas, picturesquely situated amid low mountains rising in the distant North into snow-covered peaks. Once, when his father happened to be home on leave during his holidays, Ashok brought Ramesh to spend a fortnight there. Those days had been the happiest in Ashok's life. He and Ramesh would spend hours roaming the countryside around Pradhanpur, exploring the ravines and nullahs, the river and its hidden pools where the fighting *mahseer* grew fat and heavy. They would scramble up to one of Ashok's favourite haunts, a pool with a waterfall almost a hundred feet high which was believed to be haunted and therefore left severely alone by the nearby villagers. There the two would sit, gazing at the water cascading over the edge and falling with abandon into the deep green pool below, causing a million glittering diamonds to fly up into the air. They had an almost psychic bond of understanding which made conversation unnecessary. Once, only once, as they were seated near the pool they saw a huge fish jump right out of the water, hang for a moment with its glistening body magically suspended in mid-air, and then fall back with a mighty splash into the pool. They sat enraptured, the happiness welling through their bodies in great surges.

It was in their fifth year at school, just two terms before they were due to take the school leaving examination, that their idyllic friendship came to a sudden, crushing end. Ramesh, always the more extroverted and adventurous of the two, was occasionally in the habit of breaking bounds from school in order to see a movie or have a really good tuck in one of the restaurants in town. This was a hazardous undertaking, as apprehension meant strict punishment which could amount even to expulsion. Though he tried often, Ramesh was never able to persuade Ashok to accompany him on these escapades. Despite their deep friendship, Ashok felt that the compensations of breaking bounds were not sufficient to justify the risk involved.

On this occasion Ramesh again urged him to come, but he declined. Ramesh then persuaded another roommate—Aftab—to accompany him. The fourth boy in the room was Anil, a quiet, inscrutable chap who secretly hero-worshipped Ramesh and was intensely jealous of his friendship with Ashok.

Ashok had remarked, half in jest, "Look out, Ramesh, you're bound to get caught one of these days."

Ramesh had laughed in his carefree, debonair way.

Lights-out was at eight-thirty, and the last show of the cinema began an hour later. As usual Ramesh waited for fifteen minutes. Then he and Aftab crept out of bed, put on their "home" clothes used for Saturday night dinners, and slipped out of the window into the darkness. Stealthily they made their way to the back of the house, but just as the main road came in sight they froze in horror as the blinding beam of a powerful torch burst on their faces and Mr. Dutta, the housemaster, clamped a firm hand on Ramesh's shoulder. As he did so, he said, "So that note was correct after all, we caught both of you red-handed."

So thin is the dividing line between love and hate that in a flash of humiliation and anger Ramesh assumed that Ashok must have written the note to the Headmaster. His unreasoning anger knew no limits, and his faculty for rational thought went into complete suspension. Mr. Dutta told both the boys sharply to go back to their rooms and report to him the next morning at nine. In a furious temper Ramesh and Aftab came back to their room. Anil was asleep—or so it seemed—but Ashok was awake.

"What happened," he said, "back so soon!"

Hearing his voice Ramesh's self-control completely cracked. He leapt onto Ashok's bed, pulled him up and slapped him sharply on either cheek.

"You ... you," he hissed. "You dirty, mean ...."

For a long moment Ashok was too stunned to speak. Then he burst into tears and buried his face in his pillow. He did not say anything; what was there to say when his dearest friend had accused him of a treacherous betrayal?

Ramesh flung himself into his own bed saying, "If you say a single word I'll thrash the guts out of you."

Ashok slept fitfully that night. The next morning he had high fever and was delirious. He was removed to the school infirmary where he was confined for several days. Not once did Ramesh come to see him. Ashok was so utterly miserable that he wrote a long and passionate letter to his father asking to be withdrawn from school. Col. Kripal Singh had just been posted to Delhi, where he had been given family accommodation after many years, and the prospect of having his only child with him was a tempting one. He wired to the Headmaster requesting that Ashok be allowed to come. The Headmaster had a long chat with Ashok in the hospital. Behind his forbidding exterior, he was a kind and understanding man, and finding Ashok adamant, he finally agreed to discharge him. Within a week Ashok had left the school and reached Delhi.

As for Ramesh, he had been so angry and hurt by what he considered his friend's betrayal that he felt a morbid satisfaction when Ashok was hauled off to sickbed. The housemaster had called him and Aftab to his office the next morning, and given them the severest tongue-lashing they had ever received. In view of Ramesh's athletic record and the fact that it was his first offence, he said, he was being lenient and would not expel him, but he gave him a variety of other punishments including disallowal of the Saturday night cinema and Tuesday tuckshop for the rest of the term.

When Ramesh learnt that Ashok had left school it strengthened his previous conviction, and he assumed that his erstwhile friend was too scared to face him. It was only at the end of that term when he went to say goodbye to the housemaster that something prompted him to say, "Sir, now that it is all over, could I know what exactly was written in that note by which you caught us breaking bounds?"

Dutta began to tell him, then stopped and said, "Wait, I still have the note."

He opened a drawer in his desk, rummaged around and then straightened up.

"Here it is, read it."

The moment Ramesh saw it a shock went through his whole frame and the blood drained from his face.

"What's the matter, Ramesh, are you feeling unwell?"

"N-no, Sir," said Ramesh, "except that this is not Ashok's handwriting."

"Of course it isn't," said the housemaster. "How could you ever think that your best friend would squeal on you? This note was from Anil."

Ramesh's head was whirling. His eyes filled with tears, and with a hurried mumbled excuse he rushed out of the housemaster's office and into his room. Anil was no longer there, having left a day earlier on some excuse. Ramesh threw himself on Ashok's bed which had remained vacant since his friend had left in mid-term. Great sobs racked his body as he broke under the weight of sorrow and repentance. The face of Ashok rose before his eyes, the thousand and one images of which two were unforgettable: the first when the great fish had leaped at the waterfall and they had looked at each other with wonder and inexpressible joy, the second when he had slapped Ashok that night and his friend had stared at him with an uncomprehending horror and shock which would now always haunt him.

When at last he recovered enough composure to get up he rushed straight to the Headmaster's house. Not finding him there he went to the school office and got Ashok's address. At once he sat down and wrote a long letter full of remorse and tenderness, begging to be forgiven for his ghastly mistake. He wrote again and again from home, but Ashok's father took care to see that no letter reached him. Ashok thought that Ramesh was still angry, while Ramesh assumed that Ashok was too hurt and offended to reply.

The voice of the pilot over the loudspeaker snapped Ashok out of his reverie. To his own surprise his eyes were moist, and he blew his nose before looking out of the window at the great Bhakra Dam clearly visible in the foothills. He had been there once while it was being built, and recalled being overwhelmed by the immensity of one of the world's great engineering feats. But from the air it looked tiny and insignificant, the great dam a mere pebble against the sweep of nature's grandeur. He decided to go to the lavatory. Pushing his book into the pocket of the chair in front of him he got up and squeezed past the popularity seeker. As he turned down the aisle he tripped over a toy truck that one of the twins had put there, and stumbled straight into the arms of a man who was just coming up the aisle from the lavatory.

"Steady there," the man said.

Ashok looked up apologetically, then stood rooted to the spot. The man before him was Ramesh.

2

How long the two stood there he did not know—a minute, an hour, eternity. It was a split second before Ramesh recognised him.

"Ashok," he gasped, too surprised for a moment to move. His eyes filled with tears and he pushed Ashok into the empty seat next to the window and sat down beside him. "Where have you been, why didn't you reply to my letters?"

Ashok averted his face and gazed blindly out of the window, biting so hard into his lower lip that it began to bleed. For a few seconds he fought desperately to keep his emotion under control. Then he turned to Ramesh who was weeping openly, the tears streaming down his rugged face wetting the lapels of his coat.

"I didn't get any letter," he said simply.

"But I wrote so many—at least a dozen. As soon as I discovered that it was Anil and not you who had written that blasted note."

Ashok smiled sadly. It was not the falsity of the accusation that had hurt him as much as the fact that after all those years of friendship Ramesh should have thought him capable of such an act.

"Never mind," he said, "that was a long time ago. We must forget the whole episode."

"Forget it!" Ramesh almost shouted. "How can I forget that in my blind anger and stupidity I destroyed the love and friendship of the one person who was dearer to me than anyone else in the world? Will you, can you ever forgive me?"

Ashok was again looking out of the window. The plane was now flying over a series of mountains which grew steeper and higher as they moved North. After a long silence he said, "Ramesh, in life one often comes up against circumstances that appear strange and tragic. But I believe deeply that whatever happens is ultimately for the best. I promise to forgive you on one condition—that you will never again mention the incident to me or anyone else."

Ramesh had by now gained some control over himself. He took Ashok's hand in his and said, "All right, Ashok, I accept the condition. Only remember that if ever there is anything I can do to make up for my injustice, if there is any reparation...."

"What talk is this of reparations?" said Ashok with a smile. "Reparations are between enemies, not friends."

Ramesh smiled and leaned back in his seat with a deep sigh. Then he started up again.

"But how are you, my dear Ashok, where do you live, what do you do, what happened after you left school?"

A twinge of pain passed through his eyes at the last question, but he quickly suppressed it. Ashok laughed, "One question at a time, my dear fellow."

Then he told Ramesh briefly what had happened. For a few weeks after leaving school he had been in such a state of shattered emotion that he was unable even to look at a book. It was then that he had first met Swamiji, who lived in a small cottage near Delhi. His mother went there often, and once she persuaded Ashok to come along with her. Ashok was not a particularly religious boy, but he had inherited from his mother a deep spiritual inclination. The moment he saw Swamiji something within him seemed to give, and to his mother's astonishment he burst into tears and fled from the room. Swamiji had told his mother to send Ashok alone the next day.

That meeting had been momentous for Ashok. Swamiji, his massive head encircled by a halo of snow-white hair, had talked to the boy for three hours. He seemed to have an uncanny ability to read into Ashok's mind. For the first time since he had left school Ashok had, in tears, recounted the whole painful episode.

Swamiji had listened carefully and then said simply, stroking Ashok's hair with one hand and telling his beads with the other, "My dear boy, whatever happens is according to God's will and therefore for the best. Always remember that, wherever you may be. Man can only shape his actions according to his best judgement. The results are beyond his control, therefore it is futile to grieve over them. You are still young and have many creative years ahead of you. You must pull yourself together and get on with your education."

Ashok's despair had given way to a new faith and he had decided to continue his studies. The next year he passed the school-leaving examination as a private student, getting a good second division. Then he joined one of the best colleges in Delhi, and graduated from there with a First Division in Economics Honours. His father was not rich, but he managed, at considerable sacrifice, to get the necessary funds to send Ashok to England for an advanced course in Business Management. He had returned with a diploma, and soon after had secured a position with one of the leading tobacco firms in India as their Management Adviser. The next year tragedy had struck. His father was killed in an accident somewhere in Ladakh. The blow had come as a numbing shock to Ashok and his mother. She had immediately left Delhi for her home in Pradhanpur, and since then had not moved out of there despite Ashok's fervent entreaties.

There had recently been some serious trouble in the firm. It had begun as a policy squabble at the highest level, but soon the Delhi Branch Manager had been sucked into the vortex of the dispute. He had involved Ashok also to back up his own view, and Ashok had consequently incurred the displeasure of the Managing Director. With the whole issue still hanging fire, Ashok had, in disgust, applied for a month's leave. To his surprise it was sanctioned; perhaps the management decided that it would be a good thing to have him out of Delhi for a while. He had closed down his flatlet, sent his servant on leave, and gone off to Pradhanpur to spend some time with his mother. After a fortnight he had begun to get restive, and with her unerring instinct his mother realised this and suggested that he go and spend the second fortnight of his leave in Kashmir.

Secretly, she hoped that he might also find a girl he would like to marry. Ever since he had returned from England, she and his father had been urging him to get married, had shown him several photographs of eligible girls from his own caste, and even arranged for him to meet two or three girls in Delhi. But he had been curiously evasive. Then his father had died. After a year had passed his mother again returned to the attack, only this time with more fervour.

"Your poor father has gone," she would say, "and I am also only a transitory guest here. Why don't you get married so that I can have the satisfaction of seeing my daughter-in-law before I die, and of fondling my grandchildren?"

He always muttered some lame excuse and changed the topic, but in his heart he knew that he could not delay the decision for long.

So here he was, on his way to Kashmir to spend a fortnight in the fabled vale of beauty.

"And what about you?" he said to Ramesh. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, I'm in the army as I always said I would be," he grinned. "At the moment I'm on my honeymoon, got a fortnight's leave with the greatest difficulty."

"Congratulations!" Ashok smiled with genuine pleasure. "Who is the lucky girl?"

"Come, I'll introduce you to her."

The plane was flying over the Banihal pass which leads into the Kashmir valley, and it gave a sudden lurch. On either side massive snow-covered peaks jutted ruthlessly up into the sky. Suddenly they were over the pass and into the green expanse of the valley. It was huge, thought Ashok, much bigger than he had imagined any valley could be. Ringing its immense sweep was a series of snow-covered mountains, breathtaking in their majesty. An emerald set in a necklace of pearls was how the Kashmir Valley had been poetically described, and from the air it certainly looked spectacular.

Ashok followed Ramesh to the other end of the plane. Sitting next to the window, her face glued to the pane, was a girl dressed in a pink Banarasi sari, her long hair falling in cascades to her shoulders.

"Darling," cried Ramesh, "what a glorious surprise. This is my dear school friend about whom I have spoken so much, Ashok Singh. Ashok, this is my wife, Sheila."

The girl looked around and up at Ashok. Their eyes met for a brief instant and for the second time that morning Ashok felt that he was losing his grip on reality, that he was having a long, complicated dream. The girl raised her palms in greeting and said, "*Namasté.*" Then she turned back to the window and cried, "Look, darling, look at the valley, how beautiful."

Ashok also joined his palms and said, "*Namastéji.*"

"The plane is preparing to land. Kindly fasten your seat belts and observe the 'No Smoking' sign. Please do not leave your seats till the plane comes to a complete halt." The voice of the hostess galvanized the passengers into waist-hugging activity. With a mumbled excuse Ashok walked unsteadily back to his seat, pushed past the intrepid Dale Carnegie fan, and sat down heavily, shaking his head to make sure he was awake. He was, and the hostess who waggled an accusing finger at his seat-belt confirmed it. He fastened the belt and leaned against his seat, his mind racing back again across time and space.

He had not liked London, not for the first few months at least. It was cold and rainy, and the sun was seldom visible for any length of time. When it did shine it was almost apologetic, slipping behind the clouds at the first excuse. Ashok missed the fine clear sunlight of his native land, the blue skies and, above all, Indian cuisine. He had lived in the hostel of the London School of Business Management, a dim and dreary place whose only advantage was its proximity to the School. This saved a lot of time and expense, as it was only a five-minute walk to and from the institution, morning and evening.

Once he got to grips with his studies, however, the prospect changed. Always a keen and competent student, Ashok was pleasantly surprised at the variety of courses he was expected to cover for his business management diploma—a two-year programme including advanced economic theory, econometrics, political science, outlines of chartered accountancy, labour and personnel management, the history of business administration, and a special paper on the growth of the corporate sector in developing economies. The courses were challenging, the system of teaching stimulating. In sharp contradistinction to the Indian method, the London School had no fixed lecture-attendance requirement. There was a variety of lectures by distinguished teachers, an excellent library and extremely competent tutors.

Ashok's tutor, Professor Harkwright, was a specialist in econometrics. He took a paternal interest in

Ashok's work, conducted his tutorials and seminars with great skill, and always treated Ashok as an equal. There was never any compulsion, except that born of the students' own urge for knowledge, and inside the walls of that rather forbidding stone building was a congenial intellectual atmosphere. There were about thirty students in Ashok's section, which included four other Indians, Gopal Mavlankar, G.S. Akhilan, and two girls—Savitri Gokhale and Sheila Chopra.

Ashok had never had very much to do with girls. Being an only child, and not living in a joint family, he had seldom come into close touch with feminine company of his own age. Of course there had been many neighbours—in Pradhanpur a young cousin came to see his mother quite frequently and, as he later suspected, her visits grew more frequent when he was back from school for his holidays. But despite her shy encouragement, he never summoned up enough courage even to touch her. Then at school there was a cute nurse, d'Souza, with whom all the senior boys, automatically, were madly in love. At college also he had generally avoided the girls, although they seemed to find him more than a little attractive. He was tall and slim, with clean-cut features and dark luminous eyes, surmounted by a boyish shock of hair that would never for long accept the tyranny of brush and comb. But at that stage of his life he studiously and successfully avoided any kind of emotional involvements.

In London, however, his loneliness gradually became unbearable. One afternoon after classes Sheila came up to him and said, "You look very sad today, Mr. Singh, what is the matter?"

She had said it with so much mock concern, sweet mischief dancing in her light-brown eyes, that he had been immediately captivated. She was very beautiful, her oval face classic in its configuration and her jet black hair falling in great cascades down to her shoulders. Her body was slim and superbly proportioned, but it was her eyes, always glittering with vivacious energy, that gave her that special something which sets the beautiful woman apart from the merely attractive.

They started seeing more and more of each other, discovering rapidly how much they enjoyed being together—shopping, picnics, cinemas, theatres, lectures. By the end of term it was becoming obvious to them both that they were falling deeply in love. With the Indian form of greeting, however, they hardly ever touched, except lightly and vicariously when Ashok would help her with her coat, or when in a cinema or theatre their hands would involuntarily brush against each other. At such moments a thrill would course through Ashok's veins, and in his room at night he would lie awake savouring the memory of that silken touch, the bittersweet texture of ecstasy and torture playing hide and seek with each other deep within him. He had vowed to himself that the only girl he would ever marry would be Sheila, and he had decided to broach the subject just before their final examinations.

One night they went to a theatre. It was 'My Fair Lady'—Ashok remembered it vividly, the colourful musical adaptation of Shaw's 'Pygmalion', which was such a smash hit that it was impossible for months to get tickets for it. With much difficulty, through the good offices of a fellow student who had contacts with the stage, Ashok had procured two tickets. He had enjoyed the play immensely with its gorgeous sets and lilting music, but he noticed that Sheila was strangely silent. After the show they emerged into the dark, depressing street. Acting on a sudden impulse Ashok took her in his arms, raised her face with his hand and gently kissed her lips, savouring the soft resilience of her body pressed against him. For a moment Sheila was yielding and responsive in his embrace, then suddenly she drew back with her eyes full of tears.

"No, Ashok, no," she said softly. "We cannot, we should not."

"Why," he pleaded, "why can we not love each other? Neither of us is married. I will write to my parents tomorrow saying that I have found the girl who will be my wife."

At this, to Ashok's utter amazement, Sheila broke into tears. She laid her lovely head on his shoulders, her whole body was for several minutes racked with sobs. When she had recovered some of her composure she said, "Ashok, oh Ashok, that is not fated. My father is orthodox and will never let me marry outside our caste. This morning I got a letter from him saying my wedding has been fixed for next winter; I must return at once."

Ashok was aghast. His whole being revolted against this system whereby a girl's future could be settled by her parents without so much as a casual reference to her.

"No," he cried, "this can never be. We are now living in a free country, and girls have been guaranteed their rights by law. This medieval absurdity is now dead. Write and tell your father that you are not returning home, that you will marry here in London and return only as my wife."

"No Ashok dear, it's no use, it won't work. Since mother died when I was a little girl, father has centred all hopes on me. He did not marry again for fear a stepmother might ill-treat me. He is very unwell, and is living only for the day when I marry. Now that he has chosen—well, I am sure, according to his rights—I must agree. Much as I love you I cannot, I must not do as you say."

Five days later she boarded the plane for India. Ashok saw her off at the airport. Just before the plane was to leave he kissed her again and they clung to each other with a desperate tenderness, struggling against their tears.

"I will always love you, Sheila, you and no one else."

Sheila looked up at him with fear in her eyes.

"No, forget me. There will be many other girls."

"Many others, of course, but none that I could love."

She tore herself away from him and ran towards the plane. The last he saw of her was boarding the aircraft, clad in a plain georgette sari of light coral. She stopped at the top step, turned and waved at him. Her sari was moulded along her supple figure by the brisk breeze, and her hair swept down to her shoulders. He waved back.

The plane touched down with an almost imperceptible bump. They were in Kashmir—all three of them.

3

At the airport Ashok tried to slip away, but as he was getting into the airlines bus he heard the familiar voice, now matured into manhood, ring in his ears.

"Ashok, where the devil do you think you're going? I have a car here and I will drop you wherever you like."

Ashok walked back to where Ramesh and Sheila were standing near a small Hindustan.

"Here, give me your suitcase," said Ramesh.

Taking it from Ashok he swung it up to the luggage carrier. It was by no means light, and once again, as so often in school, Ashok found himself admiring Ramesh's physical prowess.

"Now," he said, "where do you want to go?"

"I am booked at the Palace Hotel," said Ashok.

Sheila, who had been studiously surveying the contents of her bag, gave a slight start.

"The Palace Hotel," cried Ramesh, "that's where we are staying. Come and get in. No, not here, behind—with Sheila. I'll sit in front and see that this driver fellow uses the right gears!"

Ashok protested weakly.

"Look here, two's company and three's crowd, specially on a honeymoon. I'm not going to barge in on the two of you."

"Nonsense," grinned Ramesh, "we're three anyhow with this weird and wonderful driver. And, in any case," he turned to Sheila who blushed a deep shade of pink, "the honeymoon doesn't really begin until one gets to the bridal suite."

Ashok was trapped. Sheila got into the back of the car and Ashok followed her, carefully placing his briefcase on the seat between them and sitting as close to the door as possible. With a jerk the driver started off and they drove out of the airport.

Ramesh was aglow with excitement.

"I can hardly believe it's really true, Ashok, that we are together again after so many years. You haven't changed much—still the shy, slim, handsome, intellectual type."

Ashok laughed. "You're very much the same too, Ramesh, except a bit taller and a bit fatter!"

"A *bit* taller? I'm over six feet now!"

They were driving over a bare and brown hillock.

"It seems rather dry, doesn't it?" said Ashok. "You know, 'emerald set in a ring of pearls' and all that."

"Wait till you get to the hotel," said Ramesh. "It's absolute heaven there—specially on a honeymoon. What's the matter, darling?" He suddently turned to Sheila."You haven't said a single word since we landed. Are you feeling all right?"

Sheila gave a short, embarrassed laugh.

"I'm quite all right, thank you, dear. I was just thinking that one of the greatest advantages of the abolition of princely rule is that one can now live in their palaces."

"Even though we *do* have to pay through our noses to do so," added Ramesh. They all laughed.

By now they were entering the outskirts of Srinagar city. Huge chinar trees with their thick foliage and broad green leaves stood on the roadside, massive against the light blue sky. The first sight of Srinagar was not overly impressive, but soon they came to a newly built area of the town and the road curved inwards.

"There's the Jhelum," said Ramesh. The driver who had so far confined his conversation to some unintelligible grunts and nods, suddenly came to life.

"This our famous river, sahib," he said. "Srinagar called seven-bridge city, but two new built, including one we now are driving."

"What's this one called?" asked Sheila.

"Badshah Bridge, Memsahib, after great king ruling Kashmir many years previous."

As they drove over the bridge Ashok saw out of the window, a massive and handsome white building rising from the river.

"Is that the palace?" he asked.

"That's the old palace," said Ramesh, "now used as offices or something."

"Secretariat," said the driver.

"Wherever did you learn your English?" Ashok laughed. "You speak very well."

"For ten years, sahib, I with British Resident, then in 1947 take job travel agency. Allow me introduce myself—Ahmed Shaikh of Fatehkadal."

"Good heavens," laughed Sheila, "that sounds almost as impressive as Mountbatten of Burma. What or where is Fatehkadal?"

"Kadal is bridge, Memsahib. Fatehkadal third bridge of old seven. My home there. Your good self come have food some day."

They were now in a modern and crowded shopping area. A number of tongas with their tourist occupants looking faintly ill at ease jostled each other. Two or three buses loaded with passengers honked loudly on their horns, while pedestrians hurried to and fro.

"A lot of people for office hours, don't you think?" said Ramesh.

Ahmed honked furiously. "I will now show you my tictacs," he shouted.

"Your what?" said Ramesh.

"He probably means tactics," Sheila said.

"Yes, Memsahib, I expert driver, use expert tictacs."

He slowed the car down and waited till one of the crowd stood almost against the fender. Then suddenly he accelerated just enough to push the man a couple of feet. The unfortunate fellow shouted and shook his fist at Ahmed, the crowd parted as if by magic, and the car triumphantly sped on.

Ashok was just about to make some comment when the car took a sharp right turn. He looked out of his window and there, standing in solitary beauty, was a mountain topped by a stone temple. For a moment he looked at the temple uncomprehendingly, then a flash of light shot through his brain and he felt a strange exhilaration welling up inside him. The feeling lasted only a few seconds, but it was so vivid that Ashok gave an audible gasp, which he managed to camouflage by turning it into a short cough. For a minute he was too startled to speak, and he pretended to look out of the window casually and admire the scenery.

The car was now skirting the mountain, the road running parallel to a channel of water configured like a river but so still that it looked more like a lake. Trying to make his voice as steady and casual as possible Ashok said:

"Ahmed, what is this mountain with the temple?"

"Your good self not know famous landmark of Kashmir, Sahib," exclaimed the driver. "The Mountain of Shiva."

They now sped along a delightful boulevard fringing the lake. On the right the Mountain of Shiva rose gracefully into the sky. Its slope was at first gradual, covered with a variety of shrubs and small trees. About half way up it suddenly became steeper, and a magnificent plantation of pine trees thrust their evergreen branches boldly out of the mountainside. Then there was a bare, rocky slope, and finally, right at the top was the temple.

Ashok was so astounded by his strange reaction to seeing the mountain that it was several minutes before he was quite calm again. Swamiji had said to him once that there was a hidden, psychic connection between each individual and certain specific places, especially places of religious worship. His words now flashed through Ashok's mind. That must be it, he thought.

"We are there," said Ahmed suddenly.

The car turned right, drove up a stately road and then swerved again and came to halt before a gracious building standing on green lawns, fountains playing.

"Maharaja's palace," said Ahmed grandiloquently. "Your home in Kashmir."

They were shown to their rooms by an oleaginous young man in black. Mercifully, thought Ashok, they were a considerable distance apart. Ramesh and Sheila had been given a suite on the first floor of the northern wing commanding an astonishingly lovely view of the lake, while Ashok had a single room in the opposite part of the hotel which had a clear view of the mountain with the temple.

Ashok liked the building immediately. He had been rather disturbed at the prospect of living in a Maharaja's palace, and had conjured up visions of a huge Victorian monstrosity with gilded beds. As it turned out, this palace was chaste and modern. It was a large structure, but its bulk was tastefully camouflaged by its graceful design. From a central block radiated two wings, from which two other wings extended at right angles, giving the hotel the shape of a rectangle without one of its longer sides. The whole structure was set on a large green lawn with two terraces, and it commanded a breathtaking view of Dal Lake. Behind the hotel the hill rose steeply. On the extreme left the Mountain of Shiva stood, aloof and mysterious, while in front there was a huge natural amphitheatre formed by the mountains on the northwestern side of the Kashmir valley. In the foreground, quite near the Mountain of Shiva, was another small hill with some sort of a fort built around its top.

Ashok unpacked his suitcase quickly as soon as he got to his room, and hung his clothes in the closet. Having washed, he strolled out into the lawn and stood admiring the view. Truly, he thought, this is the most beautiful place in the world. There was a slight breeze and Ashok savoured its gentle bite which was in such dramatic contrast to the heat and dust of Delhi. Here the air was crystal-clear, and Ashok breathed it in gratefully, filling his lungs to capacity and then gently exhaling. "Always try and make your breathing slow and regular," Swamiji had said, and Ashok found the practice particularly helpful whenever he faced some serious problem.

At the moment, of course, the problem uppermost in his mind was Sheila and Ramesh. He had still not fully recovered from the shock of seeing them both again in such dramatic circumstances, and he wondered whether or not he should tell Ramesh that he had known and loved Sheila in London. He was deeply devoted to his friend despite the incident at school, and seeing Ramesh again after all these years had only brought home to him again the depth of his feelings. He dreaded lest his saying anything might upset Ramesh and ruin his honeymoon. Also, knowing his friend's volcanic and suspicious nature, he feared that he might misunderstand the whole affair. On the other hand, if he didn't say anything and Ramesh later found out that he had known Sheila, he might read non-existent motives into his silence. Also, Ashok was not sure whether Sheila would like him to tell Ramesh. He decided that when the opportunity arose he would speak to Sheila.

A hearty slap on the back jerked Ashok out of his conjectures.

"Enough nature study for the time being. Come and have a drink before lunch."

Ashok followed Ramesh to the bar—"the most luxurious bar East of Suez"—as the hotel brochure had said. It was really a stunner—upholstered in black and maroon, one whole wall covered with mirrors which reflected a panoramic view of the lake behind. They took a tall stool each.

"Beer for me," said Ramesh to the bartender. "What will you have?"

"A fresh lime," said Ashok with a smile.

"Bah!" Ramesh grimaced in mock disgust. "You are no longer at school, my dear boy, and thank heavens there is no prohibition in Kashmir."

The drinks came and Ramesh downed his tankard before Ashok had got half through his lime.

"Another one, bartender, and quick," said Ramesh. "Sheila must be waiting for us in the dining room."

The second beer duly arrived, frothing lusciously in its broad tankard. Ramesh gulped it down and then turned to Ashok.

"Come on, let's have lunch. Don't bother to pay," he added, as Ashok pulled out his wallet, "he'll put it on my account. Room number fifty-six."

The bartender nodded, and they walked out towards the dining room close by. The room was large and, like everything in the hotel, in impeccable taste. About thirty tables filled the spacious hall, each covered with fresh linen and gleaming tableware. At one end there was a raised platform about twenty-five feet wide, evidently for dancing. Above was a large rectangular cut-glass chandelier, modern and sophisticated.

Ramesh and Ashok stopped for a moment at one of the doors and looked around the room. Sheila was sitting in a corner near the dance floor. She smiled at them and waved.

"There she is," said Ramesh.

Wending their way between the tables they came to where Sheila was sitting. It was a table for two, but Ramesh turned to a waiter standing nearby and told him to bring a third chair. Ashok's eyes met Sheila's for a brief, very brief, second, and he thought she gave him an almost imperceptible shake of her head. Then they sat down.

"What a delightful place," said Sheila. She seemed to have recovered some of her vivacity, and Ashok noticed that she was looking lovelier than ever. In England she had been beautiful, but now there was an added maturity about her. She must have put on some weight since then, thought Ashok, but this only rounded the contours of her body to greater perfection. Also new was that golden blush of a new bride. He noticed how her magnificent eyes always sought out Ramesh, and lingered on him with a tender possessiveness. As for Ramesh, it was evident that he was totally in love with his bride. From the deepest recesses of his heart Ashok wished them happiness.

"Now tell me about your dramatic reunion," said Sheila. "If you were such good friends why did you never meet after leaving school?"

Ashok saw Ramesh's face begin to change colour, and said at once:

"Well, it so happened that since then our paths just never crossed. We wrote many letters to each other but for some reason they never reached their destination."

Ramesh shot him a grateful glance, and added, "Anyhow, that's all over. Now that I've found Ashok, darling, you can be sure I won't let him get lost again."

The dining room was full to capacity by now, and a vigorous four-man orchestra was playing pop tunes with gusto. There was a tall, dark man playing the piano, a roly-poly drummer who sat behind his drums with all the elegance of a performing seal, and a grinning violinist whose body swayed more violently than his hand. The fourth performer was a youngster with dark, wavy hair who held the microphone in a sadistic grip and poured into it the latest hit songs with a curious, though by no means unpleasant, Goan accent.

"Were you in the Goa operations, Ramesh?"

"You bet I was," Ramesh laughed. "In fact, I was with one of the leading formations that liberated Panjim. I must say," he added, "the Portuguese were a pleasant surprise. We were expecting tough resistance and they collapsed like a house of cards. With China," he added ruefully, "it was vice versa. But whatever made you think of Goa at the threshold of lunch?"

Ashok smiled. "Only the Goan orchestra."

"You and your psychological motivation," said Ramesh with a laugh. Turning to Sheila he added, "He was exactly the same at school, darling. In the middle of watching an exciting football match he would suddenly go off at a tangent and start talking about mountain flora or something equally absurd."

The food was surprisingly good for a hotel, soup followed by delicious Kashmir trout; chicken *pulao* and a local vegetable. The orchestra, after a ten-minute break, had returned to the attack with renewed vigour. They started on a tune which jogged something in Ashok's mind, when Ramesh exclaimed suddenly, "Darling, they're playing our favourite tune from 'My Fair Lady'."

The chicken slice in Ashok's mouth decided on the spur of the moment to go down the wrong channel. He coughed and reached for a glass of water. He noticed that Sheila had paled almost imperceptibly, though otherwise she was completely composed.

"Yes, dear," she said simply.

"You saw the play in England, didn't you, darling?" Then he turned to Ashok. "When did you say you were in England?"

"Nineteen fifty-nine to sixty-one."

"Did you see this famous musical?" said Ramesh. "I absolutely adore its music. Sheila has the long-playing record.

"As a matter of fact, I did," said Ashok, "and enjoyed it immensely."

"Weren't you there also at the same time, darling?"

"I returned to India at the end of fifty-nine," she said.

"Don't I know it!" said Ramesh. "We should have been married right then except for these bloody rules we have in the army. I must say, darling, it was great of you to have waited so long to marry me."

"Well worth the waiting, I'm sure," said Ashok. Sheila blushed a deep pink. "Sorry," said Ashok, "I've gone and embarrassed your wife."

"Nonsense," said Ramesh. "And stop referring to her as 'your wife' as if you were a bloody lawyer or something. She has a perfectly nice name—Sheila. Use it."

The lunch finally came to an end, anticlimactically, with with a pedestrian fruit salad. The waiter asked them if they wanted coffee. Ramesh and Sheila declined.

"Look here," said Ashok, "I'll stay on and have coffee. You two honeymooners go up and relax in your bridal suite." He gave Ramesh an affectionate wink. Ramesh grinned and prodded him in the ribs.

"Good idea, dear boy," he said. He and Sheila rose. "What are your plans for the evening?"

"*Kalah kridati, gachhati ayuh,*" said Ashok with a smile.

"You and your benighted Sanskrit. What does it mean?"

"Never mind," said Ashok. "The bridal suite awaits you."

4

The next morning Ashok decided to climb the Mountain of Shiva. Since that first dramatic impact, his eyes had time and again been drawn back to the temple. At night it was skilfully floodlit, so that it glowed with a mysterious translucence against the clear, starlit sky. From enquiries made at the the hotel Ashok had learnt that it was always open and could be reached by a fairly stiff half-hour climb from the base of the mountain. He decided to start early, having had the previous night an early dinner and gone to bed, leaving Ramesh and Sheila together. He set the alarm for five, and after a bath and his morning prayers he left the hotel at six. He did not eat or drink anything before he left, and planned to be back for a latish breakfast.

The taxi drove him around to the other side of the hill, and up to a gate which read "ANANDA ASHRAMA"—blissful resting place.

"You have to walk from here, Sahib," said the driver. "Shall I wait?"

"No, don't bother," said Ashok. "I'll get another taxi back. By the way, what do you know about this Ashrama?"

"The temple priest is a very learned man, Sahib," said the driver, "not a greedy fool like most of them. He has built this ashrama and lives here with one or two disciples. He is known as Ananda Maharaj."

Ashok paid the fare and the taxi drove off leaving him alone at the foot of the hill. He opened the gate. A large signboard with an arrow showed the way to the temple, while another path led into the Ashrama. On an impulse Ashok decided to visit the Ashrama before ascending to the temple.

The first thing he noticed was the complete stillness that prevailed. The main building was a modest wooden structure with the usual Kashmiri gabled roof. Around it were two or three tiny huts, evidently used by disciples. The compound was spotlessly clean, dotted with several small beds of yellow flowers and pervaded by a gentle aroma of incense. In the centre of the compound stood a solitary chinar tree, its green leaves fresh and virginal in the early morning light.

Ashok hesitated for a moment in the middle of the compound, not sure whether to knock or call for someone. Suddenly the door of one of the huts opened, and a young ascetic appeared. He was dressed in a bright ochre robe, his jet black hair fell to the nape of his neck. He must have been about twenty, but his face had an extraordinary composure. In one hand he held a string of beads and in the other a wooden receptacle for carrying water. His eyes glowed as if with some inner fire.

As soon as he saw the *sadhu*Ashok joined his hands in salutation. The young novice lifted his right hand in a gesture of blessing so natural and effortless that Ashok marvelled at his poise.

"Can I see Maharaj?" Ashok asked in Hindi.

"Maharaj left for the temple over an hour ago. He always greets the sunrise there." His voice was liquid like a brook in summer.

"Oh, I see," said Ashok. "I am sorry to have disturbed you."

"Not at all," said the novice. "We do not often get visitors so early. You are a stranger here?"

"Yes, just on a short visit." He paused for a moment. "How long have *you* been here?"

"For a *sanyasi* time should have no meaning." The young *sadhu* smiled, revealing a set of glittering white teeth.

"Yes, of course," said Ashok. "Well, I had better be getting up to the mountain."

"Empty—handed?"

Ashok felt ridiculous. He had forgotten the traditional offerings—water and flower—for a Shiva temple.

"Here," said the sadhu, seeing his embarrassment, "take this water to bathe the *lingam*. And here are a few flowers to offer to the Lord. We don't usually allow our flowers to be plucked, but with you it's different."

He knelt at one of the flower beds and broke off half a dozen yellow marigolds.

"Go soon," he said, "Maharaj is expecting you." With that he turned on his heels and walked back into his hut, closing the door softly behind him.

Ashok looked at his retreating figure in surprise. How could Maharaj possibly be expecting him? He himself had only decided late last night to visit the temple, and had not told anyone about it. He had mentioned casually to Ramesh and Sheila that he might climb the mountain, but it was inconceivable that they could have sent Maharaj a message to expect him. He made as if to follow the young ascetic, but then decided not to disturb him.

Mystified, Ashok started the ascent, holding in one hand the water vessel and in the other the flowers. There was a dust track about two feet wide, which Ashok followed in his firm and youthful gait. He was wearing a pair of brown corduroy trousers and a brown and grey checked shirt, with a light muffler thrown around his neck. The morning air on the mountain was crisp and invigorating, and he drew it in with animal satisfaction. After the stifling heat of Delhi the change was excruciatingly pleasant, and as often happened to him in moments of heightened physical well-being and pleasure, his thoughts turned to Shiva in love and gratitude.

Of all the myriad deities in the Hindu pantheon, representing diverse aspects of the same divine Reality, Ashok had always felt most attracted to Shiva—Shiva Mahadeva, the Great God, the Compassionate, drinking the poison to save the world from extinction; Shiva the Ascetic, lost in fathomless meditation in the snowy Himalayas, the crescent moon on His forehead; Shiva Nataraja, dancing His cosmic dance of eternal creation, protection and destruction. As he walked he seemed to shed the worries and cares that had been revolving in his mind for so long; to "let go" of himself. Swamiji had once said to him, just before he died, that there was very much more of life and existence than the conscious mind could comprehend, whole ranges of being and existence which, though as "real" as anything one could understand with one's normal mind, were yet completely beyond its scope. It was therefore very useful from time to time to break away from the stranglehold of the false ego and to let one's being come into contact with deeper ranges of experience. For this purpose he prescribed yoga, but he also said that in certain physical conditions this sort of liberation became much easier.

This mountain, thought Ashok, it *really must have some special quality*. With every step he took he felt lighter and stronger, a peculiarly exhilarating combination. The path led for about half a mile along the lower crest of the hill. Then the pine forest began, and Ashok found himself walking between huge trees stretching far up into the morning sky. The ground was littered with cones and needles, the rocks covered with green moss, the whole air suffused with the strong but pleasant aroma of the forest. Small multi-coloured birds twittered in the bushes, and at least twice Ashok saw a paradise fly-catcher, its long white plume so prized by the Mughal emperors, flit across his path. Of human company there was no sign. So much the better, thought Ashok, it's good to be alone after the mass of sweltering humanity in Delhi. People, people, people, pushing and jostling, shouting and gesticulating. He was thankful for his glorious solitude among the birds and the pines.

After about fifteen minutes' brisk walking Ashok noticed that the forest began to thin out. A little later he rounded a bend and stood transfixed. He must have climbed about a thousand feet, and now the whole of the Dal lake lay before him, surrounded by an imposing amphitheatre of mountains. From the hotel the lake looked lovely, but from up where he was the view was much richer and more overwhelming. He saw the hotel itself, neat and white in the morning light. The Dal lake was much bigger than he had imagined—it seemed to fill the entire space between the Mountain of Shiva and the high range to the east of the valley. In the morning stillness it was a sheet of glass, its surface dappled only where tiny fishing boats flitted around. Three houseboats used by tourists as changing rooms for swimming stood motionless and deserted, like children's toy models. The mountains behind were bare and massive, the highest of them covered with snow. So powerful was the stillness and so overwhelming the majesty of Nature that Ashok stood for a while absolutely motionless, unable and unwilling to break the spell. Then, suddenly, a deep voice close behind him broke the silence.

"Great indeed is the glory of God."

Ashok spun around with a gasp and found himself standing before a tall, strongly built man with flashing eyes and a long, flowing beard. His hair was brown and fell to his shoulders. He was dressed in a spotless white gown and a white dhoti, and wore a pair of wooden slippers. Around his neck was a rosary of *rudraksha* beads, symbol of a Shiva devotee, and on his forehead the *tripunda*, the triple mark of Shiva. His eyes were set wide apart and glowed with unusual brilliance, forming the focal points of a powerful presence. Most surprising of all, they were sparkling blue.

All this Ashok took in within a few seconds. Then he raised his head and their eyes met. Obeying an irresistible impulse Ashok put down the flowers and the water and made to prostrate himself at the other man's feet saying, "You must be Maharaj." With a swift gesture the man in white caught Ashok's hands and embraced him warmly. Ashok was tall, but Maharaj stood several inches higher, and for a split second Ashok got the curious feeling that he was a little boy again.

"Welcome, my son," said Maharaj. "I have been awaiting you."

"That's exactly what your disciple said to me in the Ashrama," said Ashok, "but how could you be expecting me? You do not know me, you have never seen me before, and I myself did not know that I would come up here today."

Maharaj smiled, but only said, "Come, you must be keen to have *darshan* of Lord Shiva." Then he turned upon his feet and began striding up towards the temple, which was now only about two hundred yards away. Ashok picked up the water and flowers and walked after him, quickening his pace to keep up with the taller man's stride. Soon they came to the temple, which stood on a plateau at the very top of the mountain and rose dramatically into the clear blue sky. Built over a thousand years ago, it was made entirely of stone, and exuded a sense of mystery. A long flight of steps led up to the shrine. Maharaj halted at the foot of the steps for a moment, and waited for Ashok to reach him. He removed his wooden sandals and Ashok also took off his shoes and socks, and washed his hands in a small receptacle on one side of the steps.

Maharaj took Ashok's arm and said softly, "Come." They both ascended the steps. The first flight ended at a small landing, from which a second, steeper, flight ascended to the shrine. At the head of this was a large metal bell, and as he passed Maharaj gave it a push which set it ringing with a deep sonorous sound. The boom of the great bell resounding in his ears, Ashok followed Maharaj up the final five steps into the inner shrine. A strong wave of incense swept over him as he stood at the door of the sanctum sanctorum, hexagonal and hardly ten feet wide. In the centre was a large stone *Shivalingam* about six feet high and five in diameter, made of a greenish stone that Ashok had never seen before.

Behind the stone *lingam*, glowing in the early dawn, was a magnificent bronze statue of Shiva Nataraja. In one hand was the drum, the primeval sound symbolising creation, and in the other fire, the symbol of destruction. Of the other two hands, one was raised in a gesture of reassurance and the other pointed to his raised foot as the path of salvation. This great image, which originated in South India, added a special dimension to this Kashmir shrine.

Maharaj raised his hands and folded them in salutation. Then, in flawless Sanskrit he began to chant one of the many hymns written in praise of Shiva Mahadeva, the Great Lord, by the great Shankaracharya after whom the temple was named. He sang in the morning 'Raga Bhairava', his rich voice resounding through the tiny shrine. Ashok also folded his hands and stood enraptured as Maharaj chanted:

At dawn I meditate on Shiva,
the God of gods,
who frees us from the fear of endless rebirth,
whose vehicle is a bull, and from whose locks
pours the sacred Ganga,

who with two of His hands wields the club and spear
and with the other two offers protection and boons,
who is the one and only infallible remedy
for the afflictions of finite existence:

At dawn I bow down to Shiva,
who combines in Himself
the Eternal Male and the Eternal Female,
the primeval Lord who causes
the projection, maintenance and dissolution of the Universe,
the ruler of the world, captivator of the mind,
the one and only infallible remedy
for the afflictions of finite existence:

At dawn I worship Shiva,
the one, the Infinite, the prime cause of existence
who can be learnt of only by Vedanta,
the Pure One, the Supreme Being,
devoid of the differentiations of name and form,
the one and only infallible remedy
for the afflictions of finite existence.

As the hymn drew to a close Ashok saw the *Shivalingam* begin to glow softly. The sun had risen, and its first rays streamed into the shrine between the two men who stood in the doorway. Suddenly, almost miraculously, the shrine lit up and the *Shivalingam* took on a glow as if emanating light, with the Nataraja gleaming behind it as if made of pure gold. Ashok felt a strong upsurge of joy and emotion, and for a moment he thought he would lose consciousness and fall. As if urged by some telepathy Maharaja put his hand on his shoulder and said, "Now offer the water, and then the flowers."

Ashok stepped forward and poured the water over the stone symbol, repeating at the same time a Sanskrit couplet of Shiva which Swamiji had taught him many years ago:

> I bow down to Shiva
> who, along with His eternal consort the Divine Goddess,
> is always seated in the lotus of my heart:
> who shines with dazzling radiance
> and wears as a garland the mighty king of the serpents;
> who is the incarnation of compassion
> the true reality behind relative existense.

Then he emptied the small basket of flowers and bent low, acutely aware all the time of the piercing blue eyes fixed upon him.

"Come," said Maharaja again, and Ashok followed him down the five steps and out onto the platform surrounding the shrine. This accorded a panoramic view of the whole valley, with the city of Srinagar stretched out like some gigantic amoeba and the mountains in all directions. Slowly they walked around the temple. Ashok was in complete possession of his faculties, fully alert and conscious, yet the dramatic setting of the temple, the sound of the great bell, the exquisitely chanted hymn ringing in his ears and, above all, this magnetic and mysterious figure clad in spotless white striding along ahead combined to give him a strange feeling at once of unreality and heightened awareness. He felt that it could all be a dream, and yet he had the inner conviction that this was more real than anything he had ever before experienced.

After encircling the platform Maharaj bowed towards the shrine, again rang the great bell until its sound flowed out into the morning air as if eager to fill the entire valley with its resonance, and then descended the steps. Ashok followed. At the foot of the temple Maharaj turned to the left and went towards a small niche which Ashok had not previously noticed. This contained a marble image about three feet high of an ochre-robed monk, evidently the great Shankaracharya who in the eighth century swept through India on a wave of spiritual and intellectual power which enabled him virtually single-handed to restore and glorify Hinduism. Both men bowed before the image. Then Maharaj looked at Ashok and smiled. His face was powerful, exuding confidence and serenity. But his smile was even more remarkable—a blend of wistful tenderness and deep compassion, the smile of a Buddha, a Christ. Ashok smiled back rather shyly, a thousand questions suddenly surging through him.

"Let's go into the rest house," said Maharaj, "there we can talk for a while and you can ask me whatever you wish."

There was so much he wanted to ask Maharaj but such was the spell of his personality, his almost hypnotic magnetism, that Ashok could hardly speak in more than monosyllables. On being seated in the rest house he stammered, "Who-who are you?"

"A devotee of Lord Shiva," Maharaj answered simply.

"But, I mean, are you an Englishman?"

Maharaj looked at Ashok quizzically for a moment and then burst into a long laugh, so sincere and infectious that Ashok had to grin rather sheepishly.

"And since when has Lord Shiva become the monopoly of Indians? Is he not Vishwanatha, the Lord of the world?"

Ashok reddened. "I'm sorry," he said, "only I was so surprised I had to ask."

"Yes and no," said Maharaj, "I was English by birth, but now I do not claim any particular nationality. I am a devotee of the Lord of the world, and therefore the world is my nation." After a pause he added, "What is your name?"

"Ashok Singh," Ashok began, then stopped suddenly. "But you must know my name, considering that you were expecting me."

Maharaj smiled. Ignoring Ashok's remark he said, "What is it that you seek?"

Ashok hesitated for a long while before replying uncertainly.

"I—I seek to redeem the glowing promise of the *Upanishads*—to achieve the state where all sorrow and strife cease and where shines the eternal light of bliss and certitude."

Maharaj smiled again. "You seek well, Ashok, you seek what is your birthright, you have been named Ashok, 'free from sorrow', and it is but right that you seek the sorrowless state."

"But will I ever find it, Maharaj, or will I seek all my life in vain?"

"True seeking is never in vain, my son, and true life is never ending."

With that cryptic remark Maharaj abruptly rose. "You must return now. Feel free to come and see me whenever you like. I am up here for the sunrise and sunset, at other times I am in the Ashrama."

Ashok got up and bowed to touch the other man's feet. This time Maharaj did not stop him, but when he rose he held his shoulders affectionately. His blue eyes looking deeply into Ashok's, he said, "Yes, I have been expecting you and I will try and help you in your quest. But remember, it is you who will have to tread the path and reach the goal. Others can help, as signposts help a traveller on his way, but the journey must be undertaken by each one of us alone."

He turned and strode back towards the temple. Ashok stood for a moment looking at the imposing figure walking away from him. Then he turned, picked up the empty water receptacle, and began to descend the mountain.

5

"We're off to Gulmarg tomorrow for the day. Coming?" Ramesh, Sheila and Ashok were seated out in the Hotel lawn under the thick shade of a chinar tree.

"Not me," said Ashok.

"Why not?" Ramesh asked, gulping down his beer. "What's come over you? I know you were never president of the mountaineering club at school, but you were not as lazy as all that. Don't you like being with us?"

"Perhaps he has found a girl friend and wants to be with her instead," put in Sheila with a laugh.

Ashok rubbed his ear ruefully and grinned. "No, it's not that at all. On your honeymoon the two of you should be alone together as much as as possible. Also, I want to spend the day tommorrow on the Mountain of Shiva."

"But you said you climbed it this morning," Ramesh protested. "Surely it's not all *that* worth seeing."

"It is indeed," said Ashok, "and what is more I met a most remarkable man there, the pujari. He is known as Maharaj and... ."

"You're quite hopeless!" laughed Ramesh. "You and your religion and holy men and Swamis! Why can't you live your life as it comes without constantly worrying over the whys and wherefores of existence?" He rose. "Look here, I'm going up to my room. Finish your drinks and I'll join you in the dining room for lunch in ten minutes."

He walked across the lawn into the hotel. Ashok and

Sheila watched his fine figure vanish into the verandah and then turned to each other. It was the first time they had been alone together since London, and for several minutes neither of them spoke.

Then Ashok said, "Congratulations, Sheila, for getting such a fine husband."

"Yes," she said with a smile. "I am very lucky."

"Not as lucky as he is, though," said Ashok.

Sheila blushed and looked up at him. Their eyes met and Sheila said, "Why haven't you married yet, Ashok?"

"Because since I met and lost you I have not found anyone with whom I would like to spend the rest of my life."

"How absurd." A spasm of pain passed across Sheila's face, and then her eyes lit up again with mischief. "A handsome fellow like you could take his pick of eligible young maidens in Delhi."

Ashok smiled sadly. "Yes, I suppose to some extent you are right. Mother has been after me for years—she's literally pining for a grandson. But somehow, somehow every girl I meet I compare with you and ... , well, they're just not you, that's all."

Sheila leaned forward and involuntarily put one hand on his wrist, her face grave.

"Ashok, you must forget me and marry someone nice. You cannot let my memory haunt you the rest of your life."

She paused for a moment, her gentle luminous eyes translucent with tears which she could not force back. "You know that I loved you as deeply as you loved me, and my heart will always retain the deepest affection for you. But it was just not fated that we should marry. I am now the wife of a fine man, and you must also carve out a life for yourself. You can't exist on memories and cherish unfulfilled longings for the rest of your life."

She leant back in her chair.

Ashok was deeply moved, and it was several moments before he could trust himself to speak. Finally he said, "Have you told him that we knew each other in London?"

"No." She shook her head, hair rippling on her back.

"Should we tell him?"

Sheila was silent for a long moment.

"No," she said, at last. "For one thing, he will think it odd that we didn't show any signs of recognition when we met on the plane. And also," she hesitated slightly and then went on, "he tends to be rather jealous and possessive, and has a volcanic temper."

"How well I know it," Ashok sighed. Sheila looked up at him sharply and Ashok quickly added, "We were at school together for five years, you know."

"Yes, of course," said Sheila. "I had forgotten."

"What if he finds out without our telling him?" asked Ashok.

"How could he possibly do that?" said Sheila.

"Well, let's hope he doesn't," said Ashok, "otherwise he will be really suspicious."

She looked at him with a twinkle in her eyes.

"You're not afraid of him, are you?"

"No, I'm afraid *for* him."

Sheila arched her eyebrows in surprise, but before she could say anything they saw Ramesh striding towards them.

"Look here," he boomed as soon as he was within range, "I told you to meet me in the dining room."

"Sorry," said Ashok. "We got to chatting and forgot all about the time."

"Oh you did, did you? Well, I'm famished. Come on and let's get something to eat."

Sheila rose and Ramesh wound his arm around her waist. "Come on, darling, hurry up. Come on, Ashok."

At lunch the conversation again turned to religion.

"I can never understand," said Ramesh, "how anyone can be more preoccupied with the next world than with this one. After all, even if one were to believe in rebirth, our present lives are all we can really experience. So why not make the best of it instead of moping and pining for the *next* world which may not even exist?"

"Religion is by no means exclusively concerned with the next world, Ramesh," Ashok said quietly. "In fact, true religion takes a person as and where he is and tries to help him develop his finer tendencies, to spiritualise him."

"There you go again, speaking of *true* religion. Which religion is true and which false? All religions claim to be the monopolists of truth, so I suppose it just depends on an accident of birth as to which brand you are saddled with."

Ashok smiled. "I always urged you to join the debating club at school, but you never would."

Ramesh returned to the attack with a laugh. "Now don't try and put me off. Tell me which religion is true?"

"Ekam sad viprah bahudha vadanti," said Ashok.

"Look here, if you try to pull any of your Sanskrit on me I'll fling this delicious curry straight at your face."

"Truth is one, the wise call it by many names."

"Stupid of them," said Ramesh with a broad grin. "If they're all that wise, why don't they agree on one name?"

"Because they happen to speak different languages, and because the reality that is God is so multi-faceted and comprehensive, and the human race so diffused and varied, that one cannot reasonably expect a single name to have emerged."

"All right, if these wise men cannot agree on a name, why can't they agree on a description of God? Some conceive of him as a man, some as a woman, some as a boy, some as a judge, some as light."

"That reminds me," said Ashok, "of a parable which used to be told by the great Sri Ramakrishna." He paused for a moment. "You have heard of him, haven't you?"

Ramesh smiled. "We're not completely ignorant in the army, you know, despite what you intellectuals may think."

"Sorry," said Ashok. "Well, Sri Ramakrishna used to tell the story of three blind men who came across an elephant. One happened to come up against its trunk and said that it was like a snake, another touched one of its ears and thought that it was like a huge fan, while the third touched a leg and insisted that it was like a mighty tree. They fell to quarrelling violently about the actual form of the elephant, when a man who could see happened to pass by. Realising the reason of their quarrel he explained to them that they were all correct but incomplete in their knowledge. The elephant was in fact in parts like a snake, a fan and a tree, but his totality was much greater and included all these attributes. Their quarrel was therefore absurd."

"Very interesting," said Ramesh, "but the fact remains that parables and fairy tales cannot hide the real and deep differences between various religions, differences not only of detail but in fundamentals."

Sheila said softly, "If you two would condescend to temporarily interrupt your philosophical dialogue, perhaps we could get on to the next course." They all laughed.

"Come to Gulmarg with us tomorrow, Ashok, don't be such a bore." Ramesh turned to Sheila. "Can't you persuade him to come?"

"Yes, do come," said Sheila, but her voice was so lacking in conviction that Ashok couldn't repress a smile.

"No, really not. Thanks a lot. I would have loved to spend the day with you but I really must see Maharaj again. Perhaps I will come with you on your next picnic."

"All right, all right," said Ramesh, "but we will hold you to your promise next time. That'll be Pahalgam, on Sunday."

The next morning Ramesh and Sheila left for Gulmarg after an early breakfast. Ahmed Shaikh was more excited than either of them as he bustled around piling their luggage into his car. Ramesh was an excellent golfer and had brought his clubs up from Delhi specially to play on Gulmarg's world famous course. Ashok joined them for breakfast and saw them off at the main porch of the hotel.

Ramesh was wearing a broad cowboy hat, khaki shirt and trousers. His excellent physique would be outstanding anywhere, thought Ashok, especially in Kashmir where the people were not generally very tall. Sheila wore a raw silk blouse and tight blue jeans. Ashok had never seen her in this before, and deprived of the easy flowing elegance of a sari she was, if anything, even more superb. She had tied a broad silk handkerchief over her hair to keep out the dust, and this accentuated the perfect oval of her face and set off her luminous eyes to perfection.

"You can still change your mind and come with us," said Ramesh when the last bag had been put into the car.

"No, thank you," said Ashok. "*Au revoir*, and have a good time."

"We will." Ramesh turned to Sheila. "Get in, darling." He followed her and closed the door. Ahmed bowed ceremoniously and got into the driver's seat.

As the car started off Ramesh leant forward and said to Ashok, "Get yourself a pretty girl to keep you company today. I am sure you will find her more fun than this mysterious Maharaj of yours."

Ashok smiled and waved goodbye as the car drove off. He stood in the porch until it was out of sight, and then slowly walked back and up to his room. He closed the door, sat down in one of the easy chairs, his mind a curious amalgam of hope and frustration. What after all, was the purpose of his life? He had an excellent job, enjoyed good health and all the material comforts he could reasonably expect. And yet there was some essential element missing, a curious hollowness inside him which he could not shake off. Meeting Ramesh and Sheila again had heightened this vacant feeling and made him more acutely aware of his inner emptiness.

Why did he have to worry about the whys and wherefores of existence, Ramesh had asked. Why indeed? It would be so much easier if he could just take life as it was and live it from day to day, rather than be burdened by ultimate problems. But then he was like that, this deeper questioning was a part of his psyche from which there was no escape. Was it sex, he wondered? Should he accept his mother's urging and get married? Would a wife be able to fill this gaping void deep within him? Frankly, he doubted it. He knew himself fairly well, and was reasonably certain that he would make a good husband. But he was by no means sure whether with his unresolved spiritual dilemma he was justified in involving another human being in his life. He had an innate horror of hurting things, even animals and insects, and he dreaded getting permanently involved in a relationship which might bring pain and suffering to himself and the person who would be his wife.

That left the alternative of casual sexual encounters divorced from any tinge of permanence. He was a young man in good health, and Kashmir was the most romantic place in the world. Perhaps there was something in Ramesh's suggestion after all. He had indeed tried this occasionally, especially during his days of boredom and depression in London before he had become friendly with Sheila. But the experience, though pleasant enough while it lasted, invariably left him with a depressing psychological hangover. However, this was Kashmir, and perhaps things would turn out differently here.

Suddenly the sound of the temple bell drifted across the lake from the Mountain of Shiva. With a slight start Ashok pulled himself out of his chair. He was not able to get a taxi at the hotel, and as the Ashrama was not very far from there he decided to walk. It would give him some exercise, he thought, and also enable him to decide what he was going to say to Maharaj. It was an exhilaratingly clear day, and the lake shone a transparent blue. A few clouds drifted about near the mountain tops, white and dazzling against the grey mountains. It took Ashok about ten minutes to descend from the hotel to the lake, along which the broad boulevard curved away in both directions. There was a lot of traffic, buses packed with tourists plied between the city and the Moghul gardens, several tongas clattered along bursting with multi-coloured students singing and shouting, and the pedestrians carried cameras and thermos flasks slung over their shoulders. In the lake there was a regular traffic of shikaras, the long Kashmiri boats which glide noiselessly across the face of the lake. These were a great tourist attraction, like the gondolas of Venice, and Ashok decided that instead of walking all the way to the foot of the mountain he would go by one of the boats.

There was only one lying near the steps of the lake, with a sign saying HEREAMIWHEREAREYOU. Ashok scratched his head in perplexity and then burst out laughing when he realized that it was "Here am I where are you".

As he got into the boat he said to the boatman, "Look here, don't you think you should have a new sign?"

The boatman laughed. "No, Sahib, this one very funny."

There were low cushions on the boat on which it was possible neither to sit nor lie. One lounged back in the manner of oriental potentates out of the Arabian Nights, and surveyed the surrounding scenery from that relaxed but somewhat unusual posture. Ashok sank down upon the cushions and told the boatman to go to the Dal Gate from where the Ashrama would be only a few minutes' walk. The boat started off in a leisurely way, the soft swish of the oar providing a soothing background of sound. The great mountains were perfectly reflected in the water; their image broke from time to time as the boat passed over clumps of underwater weeds.

Several boats were going in the opposite direction towards the gardens, and the boatmen accosted each other and exchanged loud pleasantries as they passed. They were a happy race, these Kashmiris, thought Ashok, despite all the political controversy in which they seemed constantly to be involved. One of the boats was full of school children dressed only in scanty swimming trunks and rowing for all they were worth. Ashok asked the boatman about them and was told that they belonged to a local school practising hard for the inter-school aquatic competitions which would be held on Independence Day. Further on, they passed a huge Kashmiri houseboat known as a *doonga*, which according to the boatman formed the permanent abode of many thousand citizens of Srinagar. The whole family was evidently having a day out, as they must have rowed all the way from the Jhelum river where they were permanently moored.

Ashok was captivated by the beauty of the lake. Directly in front of him, rising in solitary majesty, was the Mountain of Shiva upon which the stone temple stood aloof and mysterious. There was definitely something strange about that temple, thought Ashok. He could never look upon it without feeling an odd sense of disquietude as well as an inexplicable upwelling of excitement. The first dramatic sensation had not recurred, but he distinctly felt that there was a special bond which drew him to the temple. He gently sang a devotional song in his native dialect:

Listen, oh listen to me, Lord Shiva,
I bow before Thee,
grant me a vision of Your form today;

darkness threatens to engulf me on all sides,
light the candle of faith in my heart, oh Lord,
and grant me a vision of Your form today;

my frail bark is tossed ruthlessly about
on the turbulent ocean of relative existence,
lead it safely to the other shore, oh Lord,
and grant me a vision of Your form today;

the eternal longing for Your blissful embrace
throbs deep in my heart,
fulfil this desire of mine, oh Lord
and grant me a vision of Your form today.

The gentle cadences of the song died away, and Ashok felt again the indescribable sensation of being on the brink of some great revelation. The mountains, the lake, the boat, the gentle swish of the oars, the temple of Shiva high up in front of him, the lingering sound of his own voice, all these combined and fused into a single flash of experience. He felt himself to be in some strange way detached from the whole scene, watching from afar, seeing himself being rowed across the lake and singing the song in praise of Shiva. Then the boatman spoke and the spell was broken.

"We are nearing Dal Gate, Sahib. Do you want to go through it or drop off here at the Nehru Park turning?"

Nehru Park was an island in the lake where a park and a restaurant had recently been constructed, a popular rendezvous always full of people. Ashok asked to be dropped on the boulevard opposite the park. He paid the boatman and walked towards the Ashrama, reaching the entrance within a few minutes.

As before, the place was absolutely still and silent except for the birds which sang intermittently. Ashok opened the gate of the Ashrama, and as he did so Maharaj emerged from a door in the main hut. This time he was dressed in saffron robes instead of white, and Ashok was again awed by the serene majesty of his presence.

"Come in, Ashok." His deep voice broke startlingly into the silence of the Ashrama. He turned back into the hut. Ashok advanced, took off his shoes and entered.

The room was small, about ten feet square, but scrupulously clean. Like most Kashmiri structures the hut was made entirely of wood, and to the peculiar perfumes of the planks was added a strong aroma of incense arising from a small brazier placed in one corner of the room. A soft woollen carpet was spread against one wall, and on this were two low cushions covered with ochre cloth. The walls of the room were quite bare except for a striking painting of Shiva and His divine consort Parvati just above where Maharaj took his seat. He sat cross-legged and beckoned to Ashok to sit on the cushion next to him. In front of them was a low wooden table. As soon as they were seated the young ascetic entered with a small plate containing some fruit which he placed on the table, bowing low before Maharaj. Ashok folded his palms in greeting, and the young *sadhu* nodded to him in acknowledgement. Ashok was struck by the gentle dignity which the young man displayed, and could hardly take his eyes off him. "His name is Madan."

"How gentle he is," said Ashok, "and how poised."

"He is fast nearing the goal," said Maharaj.

"What, at his age? He is little more than a boy."

Maharaj smiled. "The quest is not of one life alone, Ashok. Who knows how many lives it has taken us all to get where we are?"

Madan returned, this time with two glasses of milk. He put them also on the table and silently withdrew, leaving Maharaj and Ashok alone.

"Do you like milk?" Maharaj asked.

"Yes, very much," said Ashok.

"Have some. It's from our Ashrama cow, I am sure you will like the flavour." Maharaj picked up one of the glasses and handed it to Ashok. From the other he drank himself. The milk was indeed delicious, fresh and with a peculiar mountain flavour. Ashok drained his glass almost at one gulp.

"Want some more?" asked Maharaj, who was sipping his.

"No, thank you. May I have an apple?"

"Of course, and here's a knife."

Ashok began to slice the apple. After a few moments he said. "Maharaj, please tell me which path of spiritual endeavour I should follow."

Maharaj smiled softly and leaned back against the wall.

"That depends very much upon what you mean by 'spiritual' and what you hope to attain by the endeavour, doesn't it?"

"I have all the material things of life that I could ask for, Maharaj, and yet I am not satisfied. There is some essential thing missing which I feel only spiritual development can give me."

"Whatever made you think that material possessions could possibly satisfy anyone for any length of time?" said Maharaj. "In fact, after a certain necessary minimum they only add to a person's worries and trouble."

"Then what should I do?"

Maharaj was silent for a moment. Then he said:

"Every man has to approach the Divine in his own way. You must remember that the Divine is the one and only Reality that exists, manifesting Itself through each and every object in the cosmos. Even the material possessions of which you speak are in fact emanations of His reality and manifestations of His grace. But in order to realise this, not merely as an intelllectual proposition but as a living and pulsating reality, we must first free ourselves from the constricting bonds of attachment to lower objects."

"Yes, but how?"

"By harnessing all our energies—physical mental, emotional, psychic, spiritual—to this one great task. But before we can do that we must be absolutely dedicated to the quest. If you have an attitude in which you want all the objects of everyday life and *also* the Divine, in which you merely condescend to keep a small part of your time for the Divine as long as it does not too obtrusively intrude upon your existence, then the higher path is not for you."

"But does one have to give up everything before one can find the Divine?"

Maharaj laughed and put his arm affectionately upon Ashok's shoulder.

"No, no, my dear boy, one doesn't have to give up everything, but one must be *prepared* to give up everything if necessary. The whole point is that if we are convinced that the Divine is the most supremely desirable object then a conditioned approach to it just will not do."

"But what if one gives up everything and then finds that there is nothing at all at the end of the road?"

great question

Maharaj's face grew serious.

"That is a risk which everyone entering the path must take. There is no purely intellectual proof so strong that it can convince everyone of the existence of the Divine. The starting point always involves faith, but once set on the path a spiritual momentum is gained which in time leads to all doubts and questionings melting away like morning mists at the rising of the sun. Your only assurance is that men have trodden this path before and have reached the goal."

"Have *you* reached the goal, Maharaj?"

Maharaj looked at Ashok for a moment and then burst into one of his long infectious laughs.

"My dear boy, is it your spiritual problem we are discussing or mine?" Then he went on: "I said that all energies must be harnessed for the quest if it is really to be seriously pursued. If one wants to cross to the other bank of a lake one has to embark on the crossing. Merely standing on the shore and arguing or speculating about how deep the lake is or how long it will take to cross will not bring us an inch nearer the goal. As the *Upanishad* says, 'Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached,' our whole existence is a pilgrimage of the individual soul towards the great goal that shines in glory, the light of lights, the power which, shining, illumines all that exists in the universe. To doubt its existence is a thousand times more absurd than to doubt the existence of the sun."

"But where is He, why can we not see Him?"

"He is everywhere, but we cannot see Him because our eyes are blinded by ignorance. He is within you, within the deepest recesses of your being. He is the subtlest of the subtle, the greatest of the great. He is that which cannot be expressed in words, but by which the tongue speaks; which cannot be seen by the eyes but by which the eye sees; which cannot be heard by the ear, but by which the ear hears, which cannot be comprehended by the mind but by which the mind comprehends. He is the inexhaustible fount of bliss and power and glory. He has the splendour of a million suns, the radiance of a million moons."

As he spoke Maharaj's whole being seemed to become charged with psychic energy, his body began to vibrate with some inner ecstasy and his eyes flashed with power. Ashok was too moved to say anything, and found himself being swept away by the powerful currents that emanated from the body of the saint. Maharaj leaned towards him and pressed his thumb between Ashok's eyebrows. At his touch a strange shudder of joy shot through Ashok, and he looked deep into Maharaj's eyes. Suddenly Ashok felt himself losing consciousness, but at the same time he experienced the dawn of an entirely new awareness. A fountain of molten fire shot up his spine, wave after wave of bliss flowed into him on all sides. He forgot his name, his surroundings, his finite existence—all were submerged in an extraordinary expansion of consciousness. The whole world seemed to explode around him in a flash of light that encompassed his entire being. The walls of the little hut vanished into a swirl of eternity and he felt himself swimming in a vast ocean of radiance and joy. Time seemed to have no existence, everything was the here and now. For only a few seconds Maharaj held him with both arms outstretched and looked deep into his eyes. Then he relaxed his grip and Ashok fell in a heap onto his lap.

Ashok slept. How long he lay there he did not know, but when he awoke it was with a feeling of well-being and tranquillity that he had never before experienced. For a moment he could not remember where he was. The hut was empty, and he found that he had been sleeping on the two ochre cushions. He jumped to his feet with a start and looked at his watch.

It was six in the evening.

6

Ashok awoke to the sound of loud knocking on his door. He rubbed his eyes and reluctantly heaved himself out of bed. The sunlight was streaming into his room, and he realised that it must be fairly late in the morning. He opened the door and Ramesh strode in and began searching around the room.

"What on earth are you looking for?" he asked.

Ramesh laughed. "You have slept so long that I was sure you had a pretty girl with you at night who was hiding here somewhere."

"Oh, shut up!" Ashok smiled. "Did you have a pleasant time at Gulmarg?"

"I did indeed—only one over par round eighteen holes. Pretty good, don't you think?"

"Excellent," said Ashok. "Are you aiming at the national championship this year?"

"I am. Not that I'm hopeful of being able to get leave, but still .... But what in the devil's name did you do the whole of yesterday, and why did you go to bed so soon?"

"I... er,... I spent some time at the Ashrama," Ashok lied, "and went to bed early because I had a bad headache."

"You mean you spent the whole day there with your wonderful Maharaj." Ramesh grew serious. 'Look here, Ashok, what is the matter with you, why can't you snap out of it and live a normal life like everyone else? Get married, that should bring you down to earth. Shall I ask Sheila to find a really nice girl for you?"

"No," said Ashok quietly. "I am not like everyone else, you're not like everyone else, no one is like everyone else, we are all unique beings utterly unlike everyone else. You army chaps think that putting the same uniform on a million individuals makes them all alike. Well, it doesn't."

"All right, all right, calm down." Ramesh was grinning again. "Why this anti-marriage hysteria?"

"It's nothing of the sort. It's just that I am quite happy as I am."

"Well, you certainly don't look it."

"What do you expect me to do, keep grinning like a Cheshire cat and burst into peals of laughter at the slightest provocation?"

"No, I want you to come down and join us for breakfast."

"Give me half an hour and I'll be down," said Ashok.

Sheila was wearing a sapphire blue sari, with a single string of pearls round her superb neck. The vermillion wedding mark shone on her forehead.

As they entered the lounge Ramesh paused for a moment and then turned to Ashok, "Don't you think she's divine? She's the most beautiful woman in the world!"

"She is indeed!"

"Aha, did you hear that, darling?" Ramesh said as they neared her. "Ashok thinks you're the most beautiful woman in the world."

Sheila looked up startled, then she laughed. "Poetry seems to have been a strong point in your school," she said.

"It certainly was, and Ashok here was the star scholar. Believe it or not, at one time he knew half of Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* by heart."

"I don't believe it." Sheila turned to Ashok, her eyes brimming with mischief. "Recite any eight lines, please."

I can give not what men call love
But wilt thou accept not
The worship the heart lifts above
And the heavens reject not,
The desire of the moth for the star,
Of the night for the morrow,
The devotion to something afar
From the sphere of our sorrow.

For a moment the lights faded in Sheila's eyes. Then they lit up again.

"Well done, sir, you are a credit to your school."

"Didn't I tell you, darling? You must hear him sing sometimes—Ashok, the nightingale of Ashok House."

"I must indeed. You are a man of many hidden talents, Mr. Singh."

"*Ashok*. For God's sake call him Ashok. What do you think this is, a civic reception or something?'

Ashok broke in, "What about that breakfast you promised me?"

"Come along, let's have it and then we'll sit out on the lawn."

The garden was a blaze of colour, and they sat on comfortable chairs in the shade of a chinar tree with a soft breeze from the lake blowing over them. For several minutes they drank in the panoramic view. Children of guests gambolled around on the lawns, rolling down the grassy incline that connected the two terraces. A pair of superb labradors with velvety ears and gentle, liquid eyes, one black and the other yellow, frisked about among the children.

Ramesh waxed eloquent over the Gulmarg golf course.

"You really should have come, Ashok," he said. "Don't you play at all?"

"I do occasionally at Delhi."

"Well, then, you really must play at Gulmarg, it's absolutely out of this world. The course is set on the rolling downs of a magnificent plateau, and on one whole side there are pine forests topped by a snow-covered range. As one drives one sees the ball soaring into space against this wonderful backdrop."

Sheila laughed. "Another few days in Kashmir and you'll be a poet too, darling."

Ashok turned to her.

"Did you also like Gulmarg?"

"I did indeed. Actually Ramesh wanted to stay there overnight and play again today, but the hotel was full. In any case, lovely as it is, I still prefer this. Look at the view, how exquisite. I never knew anything could be so utterly beautiful."

"Nothing *can* be as beautiful, darling."

"I don't agree." Ashok leaned forward.

"What do you mean, you don't agree?" said Ramesh. "What could be more beautiful?"

"The splendour of a million suns, the radiance of a million moons."

Ramesh looked at him for a moment.

"Did your Maharaj say that?"

"Yes."

"You know what?" he said.

"No, what?"

"You should see a good psychiatrist when you get back to Delhi."

Ashok smiled and said, "I've got some letters to write, so I'll retire and leave you two lovebirds alone."

As he rose Ramesh said, "Remember you've promised to come to Pahalgam with us day-after-tomorrow, and I'm not going to let you wriggle out of it. All you'll do here the whole of Sunday is go and spend hours at your mysterious Ashrama."

"And tomorrow we all go shopping," Sheila added.

"All right, I'll come," said Ashok. He got up and walked towards his end of the hotel.

Try as he would, he was not able to shake off the curious feeling of unreality that suffused him after the amazing encounter with Maharaj the previous day. The experience of ecstasy had opened up new vistas in Ashok's mind. He had never really believed that such realms actually existed, although Swamiji had often spoken about them. He had been reading about superconscious experiences for several years, especially since his return from England. He had craved for some elevating experience, and here in Srinagar, he had come face to face with one who was evidently a highly superior individual, whose mere touch could send Ashok's whole structure of consciousness spinning in the vortex of a great revelation.

Since last evening he had become aware of a new dimension within himself, a strange something that softly pulsated just below the surface of his consciousness. In his morning prayers, when he sat upright and recited hymns to Shiva, he felt a gentle throbbing at the base of his spine and his body was suffused with a glow of well-being. Swamiji had told him about the mysterious *Kundalini*, the Serpent Power that lay coiled within every human body waiting for the propitious moment when it can rise in glory.

And yet he was afraid, afraid of the awful majesty of the revelation, of the immense psychic power and strength that emanated from Maharaj. He realised that he was fast approaching a truly decisive point in his life, nearing the crossroads when he would have to decide whether to go on with his old life or take an entirely new direction. He had always craved for spiritual certitude, and its possibility was now coming into sight. And yet, of this he was quite sure, this would mean his having to make a clean break with his old life—his mother, his job, Ramesh and Sheila, above all his old ego-centred existence. And this frightened him, for he was not yet sure whether he had the courage to plunge into the great unknown even with a master like Maharaj at his side. All his life he had been seeking a guru. Now he had found one, the like of which he never could have believed actually existed, but he was unsure as to whether he himself was ready.

That day he succeeded in eluding Ramesh, and on the plea of going to see Maharaj he had an early lunch and left the hotel. He wanted to be alone with his thoughts, and so went in the opposite direction, past the famous Nishat and Shalimar gardens built centuries ago by the pleasure-loving Moghuls and on to a quieter garden called 'Harvan' where there were fewer people. The lawns were well kept and as he entered them with pleasure, the flowers, proudly displaying their myriad colours, welcomed him. Only four or five other people were there, and Ashok wandered through the garden until he came to a steep flight of stone steps with a sign "Harvan Reservoir". This must be the place from where Srinagar got its water supply, he thought. He ascended the steps.

As he got to the top he let out a little gasp of joy. The small lake was deep blue, evidently much deeper than the Dal. On the right the mountains rose sheer into the sky, thickly afforested with dark coniferous trees. Straight ahead was a much higher snow-covered range, and dominating the skyline was a trinity of peaks—Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, thought Ashok. It was absolutely peaceful, with not another human being in sight. A high embankment ran around the lake, and Ashok walked on it slowly, lost in thought.

What mystic destiny had brought him to Kashmir? There was something here for which he had long been seeking, of that he was sure. Somehow, wherever he went in Kashmir he felt a strange sensation of tranquillity, so unlike Delhi or even Pradhanpur. There was, as it were, a mystic dimension in Kashmir that enthralled the soul and lifted it upwards. Shiva dominated everything—the mountains, the lakes, the sky. It was as if an invisible but clearly felt presence hovered over the whole valley. Ashok wondered whether others had also experienced this curious feeling or whether it was purely subjective, an emanation from his own inner being.

"Our whole existence is a pilgrimage of the individual soul towards the great goal that shines in glory, the light of lights ..." Maharaj had said. Was he on the path, was he nearing the goal?

Ashok looked round suddenly. There was no one in sight. Curious, he thought, I could swear there was someone watching me. Then he looked up. Against the deep blue sky a magnificent golden eagle was wheeling in majestic arcs. Ashok watched it with fascination, hardly daring to breathe lest he disturb its flight. Three times the great bird circled the lake, its feathers glowing in the afternoon sun. Then it flew off towards the snowy trinity, and Ashok stood transfixed until it became a tiny speck against the mighty sweep of the mountains, and finally vanished from sight.

On Saturday Ashok, Ramesh and Sheila went on a shopping expedition in the city, visiting shops with quaint names like Suffering Moses, Subhana the Worst, Ganymede. The embankment along the Jhelum river known as The Bund had a row of shops along it for almost two miles, and several were located in houseboats moored on the river. Tall, slender poplar trees reflected their graceful forms in the water, hawkers displayed their wares—ranging from fresh vegetables to colourful papier-mache work, multi-coloured flowers to embroidered shawls.

Kashmir was indeed an idyllic place, thought Ashok. Ramesh and Sheila were both in high spirits. Every few minutes Sheila would cry, "Oh, look at that divine cape", or "Darling, do let's buy that set of carved tables." Ramesh would remark ruefully, "Don't forget I'm a modestly-paid army officer, not a Maharaj or something!"

As Ramesh paid the bills he was always the last to leave a shop, while Sheila and Ashok would proceed along the Bund with the parcels. Once or twice they were almost lost in the crowd of shoppers and Ramesh had some difficulty in locating them again, which irritated him. By noon they were exhausted, weighed down by parcels of all shapes and sizes. As they emerged from one of the shops another tourist happened to bump into Sheila and sent her packages flying in all directions.

"I'm very sorry," he mumbled and bent to gather them up again. Before he could do so however, Ramesh jumped upon him and pulled him to his feet by his coat lapels.

"You fool," he shouted, "why can't you damn well see where you're going?"

Sheila was aghast.

"Don't be silly, darling, he didn't do it on purpose, it was an accident."

"Well, he should have been more careful."

The hapless tourist mumbled his apologies and fled.

Ashok came up and put his hand on Ramesh's arm. "Really, Ramesh, you must learn to control your temper."

For a moment their eyes met, then Ramesh burst out laughing.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's only that I can't stand anyone touching Sheila."

"Let's have something to eat," said Sheila. "It's lunch time and I'm too hungry to wait till we get back to the hotel."

A few yards ahead was a tiny restaurant with the enticing sign: "Venice of East—Best Food in Kashmir".

"El Dorado," said Ashok.

As they entered, a dark, thick-set man stepped out, evidently a South Indian. He looked vaguely familiar to Ashok, but he did not show any sign of recognition.

The restaurant was tiny, only about fifteen chairs in all. They chose a table near the door and sat down, while Ramesh went to the toilet. In a few minutes the proprietor, a round barrel of a man with a Persian cap, rolled towards Ashok and Sheila, bowing and smiling broadly.

"Aha, on honeymoon no doubt. Welcome to Venice of East."

Sheila turned pale. Before Ashok could reply Ramesh had come up from behind. Placing his hands on the fat man's shoulders he twirled him round.

"My dear fellow, don't confuse things. She and I are on the honeymoon."

The flustered proprietor bowed again.

"Thousand pardons, sir. Welcome. What can I offer you?"

"Well, first of all bring me some beer. These two here don't drink anything nearly so strong. Ashok, what'll you have?"

"A fresh lime," said Ashok. Ramesh grimaced.

"The same for me," Sheila said with a laugh.

"Two fresh limes and one beer, as large and as cold as you can make it. And show us the menu."

They waited for the menu in silence. For the first time since they had met there seemed to be tension between them. A boy came with the drinks. Ashok and Sheila began sipping their lime juice, but Ramesh downed his beer almost in a single breath, banged his tankard down on the table and shouted for another.

"Whatever gave that silly ass the idea that you two were on a honeymoon?"

"Really, Ramesh," said Sheila.

Ashok finished his drink and got up.

"I'm not hungry in any case, so I think I'll push off. See you at the hotel in the evening."

Sheila looked up with a pained expression: "Do have lunch before you go."

Ramesh was staring stonily in front of him.

"I'm quite happy," said Ashok. "I always said three's a crowd."

He walked out of "Venice of East" into the happy throng of people on the embankment. He had seen that Ramesh was getting into one of his dark moods, and realised that it would be wise to stage as early an exit as possible. He decided to have a snack at a tea house further on, wandered along the river a bit and then took a tonga to the Mountain of Shiva.

It was about four-thirty by the time he reached the Ashrama. The tongaman demanded what Ashok considered to be an exorbitant sum, but he was in no mood to haggle. He paid him off, and then he entered the compound. Once again the rare stillness that pervaded impressed him. At one corner of the garden was a small pond evidently built around a spring, because crystal-clear water constantly bubbled to the surface and flowed out into a tiny canal. The gentle murmur of running water highlighted the all-pervading calm that hung over the Ashrama. The huge chinar tree with its exuberant foliage stood, an ageless sentinel of this holy spot, its shade perfect and unbroken. It was only at the peripheries that some sunlight was able to filter through, tracing delicate patterns of light and shade on the grass below.

For a few minutes Ashok stood quite still, trying to imbibe the calm that permeated the whole atmosphere. Then he stepped forward to the main hut and knocked softly on the door.

"Come in, Ashok."

Maharaj was seated in a corner of the room. He beckoned Ashok to come and sit next to him.

"How have you been?"

"Well, thank you," said Ashok. Then after a pause he added, "What did you do to me the last time we met?"

Maharaj smiled.

"You are evidently ready for a spiritual transformation. You went into a trance almost as soon as I touched you."

"It was wonderful," Ashok said. "That glorious feeling of exaltation and ecstasy. But ..." he hesitated.

"Go on."

"But for some reason I am afraid, Maharaj, afraid of you and your mystic powers, afraid to plunge into the unknown."

Maharaj smiled again, a wistful, endearing smile that lighted up his whole face.

"That is but natural. The spiritual path is not an easy one. It is sharp and dangerous, as the *Upanishads* say, like unto a razor's edge. Essentially, it involves totally transcending one's lower ego, and that is where the fear arises, the fear of the ego that in the new order it will no longer be able to continue its wilful and despotic dominion and will have to bow before the greater truth and power of the higher self. Therefore it is afraid, as creatures of the darkness are afraid to enter the pure and blinding light of the sun."

"Will I find God?" Ashok broke in.

"You will find yourself if you seek with courage and faith, and God is seated in the very innermost recess of your being. But you must break the chains of egocentrism that bind you before you can hope to realize Him. As a great poet has said:

> In the sweep of the worlds, in the surge of the ages,
> Ineffable, mighty, majestic and pure,
> Beyond the last pinnacle seized by the thinker
> He is throned in His seats that forever endure.

The master of man and his infinite lover
He is close to our hearts had we vision to see,
We are blind with our pride and the pomp of our passions,
We are bound in our thoughts where we hold ourselves free.

"Who wrote that?"

"Sri Aurobindo."

"I never knew he was a poet too," said Ashok. Then he added, "But today I have come to seek your advice in a very different sphere. I am not sure," he hesitated for a moment, "whether you would be interested in a problem quite unconnected with spirituality."

Maharaj leaned forward and placed a hand gently on Ashok's shoulder.

"My dear boy, for us there is no distinction between various facets of life, on neat compartments into which spiritual and other problems are placed. Life is essentially a unity, and must be viewed as such. There is and can be no personal problem that is unconnected with spirituality."

Ashok smiled gratefully. How warm and understanding was the personality of this man! He decided to tell him the whole background of his relationship with Ramesh and Sheila, leaving out nothing. He spoke for about half an hour without any break, while Maharaj listened silently. When Ashok had finished the other man spoke.

"Your problem is esssentially an inner one, Ashok. This 'chance' meeting with Ramesh and Sheila—it means that a crucial point has been reached in your inner development which demands from you a clear-cut decision. Outer crises are always the reflections of inner conflicts, and this is no exception."

"Then what should I do?"

"That I cannot tell you. It is for you to decide. Only remember that the decision will be of crucial importance."

Maharaj rose abruptly. "I must get up to the temple before sunset. Would you like to come?"

Ashok shook his head.

"No, thank you, I have got to get back to the hotel. We are going to Pahalgam tomorrow and I will come again as soon as I get back."

"Do," said Maharaj. They had both risen, and Maharaj smiled and said: "The decision must be yours and yours alone, Ashok, both on the outer and the inner paths. I am there to help you, but not to decide for you."

When Ashok got back to his room he found a note awaiting him. It was from Ramesh.

"Dear Ashok,
I am ashamed of my silly behaviour this afternoon. Please forgive me. You *must* come with us to Pahalgam tomorrow, otherwise we will both be very hurt.
Love,
RAMESH"

Ashok sat quietly for several minutes after reading the note. He realised that Maharaj was no ordinary guru, and that he would do nothing to save him from the painful necessity of coming to his own decisions. He wondered whether he would go with Ramesh and Sheila tomorrow. Yes, he thought finally, he would go. Perhaps the trip itself would help clarify his future line of action.

7

The road to Pahalgam ran parallel to a mountain range for the first thirty miles, through fields of paddy and saffron. The saffron was not yet flowering, but Ahmed Shaikh waxed eloquent about the rare plant.

"Most wonderful saffron in world, Sahib, for food, medicine, health, prayer."

"But where is the saffron?" asked Ramesh. "All I can see is paddy and some bare fields."

"The saffron has been planted in fields, Sahib, will flower in October."

About twenty miles out of Srinagar they passed on their left the impressive ruins of an ancient stone temple. Ashok asked Ahmed to stop, and they got out to take photographs.

"This was built in the 9th century by the great King Avantivarman," said Ashok, "and dedicated to his patron deity Shiva. Hence the temple was known as Avantishwara, and the capital as Avantipura."

"How do *you* know, never having been to Kashmir before?" said Ramesh.

"I read, you know."

"Isn't this Martand, the sun temple?" asked Sheila.

"No, Memsahib," Ahmed broke in. "Martand is further on."

"Even I have heard of Martand," said Ramesh. "It's the most magnificent of the temples here, isn't it?"

"It is indeed," said Ashok. "I do hope we'll be able to visit it on this trip. I've been wanting to see it ever since I first read about it as a boy."

"I'd love to see it too," said Sheila.

They got into the car and drove on. Soon they came to a village with the sign "Bijbehara" and at a large grove of tremendous chinar trees the road branched off to Pahalgam. This bit was evidently new, and the surface was not as smooth as the highway, but the scenery, if anything, was even more bewitching. They drove up along a mountain stream, Ashok and Ramesh siting at the back and Sheila in front with Ahmed, as she had a tendency to get queasy on a long drive and subscribed to the hoary superstition that the front seat prevents sickness.

Ramesh said, "Ashok, at school you were a good singer. How about a song to liven up the drive?"

Ashok protested, "I am out of practice."

"Nonsense," said Ramesh. "I am sure you know some good ghazals. Come on, out with it."

Ashok started singing. He was fond of music, and specially when in motion he was particularly prone to burst into song. He sang a ghazal, an Urdu love song from one of the films:

Intoxicated with love, it was my heart's desire
to go even beyond the goal,
if only I had a companion
I would also walk with a proud swagger.

I did find my companion,
but on the way there was the city of destiny,
my companion was summoned to that city
and I was left rubbing my eyes in sorrow.

The dust of memories is in my eyes,
the desire for love is in my hands,
in the desert wastes of my dreams, alone,
I am tired of this endless travel.

He had a fine voice, and so poignant was the refrain of the ghazal that for a long moment after he ended none of the others spoke. Ashok could see the nape of Sheila's neck slowly reddening as he sang.

It was Ahmed who first broke the spell as he negotiated a particularly sharp turn, "*Shabash*, Sahib, you indeed champion singer."

"Didn't I tell you, darling?" said Ramesh. "Ashok was the star singer in our House."

"Yes, what a lovely song."

"But what a sad one. Really, Ashok, you will simply have to get yourself a girl. Or did you have one and lose her?"

Ashok laughed to hide his embarrassment. "Of course not, I merely liked the tune."

By now they had driven several miles up the valley, which was rapidly narrowing. Soon they came onto a much larger river rushing down, milky white, with a great roar.

"The Lidder, Sahib, famous river."

They crossed a fairly long bridge and then turned left again. The valley had by now narrowed to a couple of hundred feet and the mountains on either side were sheer and they drove along it for about five miles before the road suddenly opened out into an exquisite valley. It was about three miles across and eight long, with huge mountains on every side. At the far end, opposite where they entered, was a mighty snow-clad range rising up into a peak. The valley was green, with the river gushing rapidly down the centre, and all around were pine forests flowing over the hills like green capes.

"Phew!" said Ramesh. "Quite a sight!"

Ahmed drove them rapidly down into the village. There was a central street with shops on either side selling a wide variety of articles including mountaineering equipment and Kashmiri handicrafts. Ashok noticed a mosque and, slightly further on, a temple dedicated again to Shiva. *He is ubiquitous*, Ashok thought.

Ramesh said, "Where do you think we should stay, Ahmed?"

"If no booking, Sahib, stay at Club".

He drove on throught the main street, past the temple whose tin roof glittered in the sun, and turned down into a large park with the sign "Pahalgam Club".

"What a glorious place." Sheila had hardly spoken on the trip, and not at all since Ashok's song. They all got out of the car and walked into the club, asking Ahmed to take care of their luggage.

It was a pleasant building, thought not particularly striking. Obviously the tourist season was in full swing, for the whole place was teeming with people, mainly Indians but with a fair sprinkling of foreigners with their inevitable cameras. As they entered the main lounge there was a babble of tongues covering almost every language in India and several foreign ones. Tourism, the great integrator, thought Ashok, as they made their way to the counter.

Ramesh asked the booking clerk, "Does this Club have rooms to let?"

"Yes, sir, but I'm not sure whether we have any free. Let me see. One room?"

"One double and a single," Ashok said. The clerk pulled a much misused register from one of the drawers and looked through it. "Well, sir, if you can wait till the evening I could give you the rooms, because a large party leaves for Srinagar this evening."

"That's fine," said Ramesh. "Who wants a room in the day anyhow?" He winked at Sheila. "Now let's have lunch and then decide what we're going to do for the rest of the day."

The club lawns went right up to the river, and several wooden platforms had been built jutting onto the stream. They lunched there off rickety tables. The waiters' uniforms looked rather ancient but the food was delicious, four or five varieties of meat, numerous vegetable dishes and curd preparations. Ramesh ate heartily, but neither Ashok nor Sheila ate with any enthusiasm. It was as if the ghazal had brought down an invisible cloak upon their relationship of which, of course, Ramesh was blissfully unaware.

"What on earth is wrong with the two of you?" Ramesh was tucking into his third helping.

Sheila said, "You know car journeys don't agree with me, darling."

They continued with small talk till the end of the meal. Ramesh finally pushed his chair back and got up with a groan.

"I'll go and wash my hands and also find out what the done thing is in the afternoons." He got up and strode towards the Club house.

They watched him in silence until he reached the building. Then Sheila turned to Ashok.

"Why, oh why did you have to sing that song?" Her eyes filled with tears. "Oh Ashok, you *must* snap out of this, you simply can't spend the rest of your life ..."

"I ... I'm sorry," said Ashok. "I don't know what's come over me. I never meant to sing that particular song. it ... it just came." He went on: "The fact is that seeing you again after all these years has just knocked me out. I had with difficulty reconciled myself to losing you, but I hadn't bargained on seeing you again. Somehow I had assumed that we would never meet as long as we lived."

"Well, we have, and you must pull yourself together. Please, Ashok, don't make it so difficult for me."

Unknowingly, while she was speaking one of her hands had come up and lay on Ashok's. Her touch was so gentle, so loving that Ashok drew his hand away in alarm.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to be rude."

Before she could say anything they saw Ramesh striding back to the table grinning broadly.

"Believe it or not, there's a golf course here too. The man says it's new and only nine holes, but I am going to have a go at it anyhow. Also, I learn that Martand is only a couple of hours drive from here. So, Ashok, why don't you take Sheila and show her Martand while I go round the course?"

"No, darling, I'd much rather walk around with you."

"Nonsense, I know how keen you've been to see Martand. You may never get another chance, remember, being married to an army officer. Nor will you get as learned a guide as Ashok."

"I would have loved to take Sheila to Martand, but I'm not really feeling up to it today."

Ramesh was indignant. "I cannot understand why both of you are so difficult. I love golf and Ahmed is an expert caddy, so you take Sheila to Martand and no nonsense."

Ashok felt his mouth go dry. "Well, if you insist ..."

"I do. You'd better leave at once so that you can be back well in time for dinner."

Ashok and Sheila took a taxi from Pahalgam and reached Martand in about two hours. Leaving the taxi a couple of hundred yards away, they walked through terraced fields until they came upon the great ruin. Sheila could not suppress a short gasp of excitement.

Martand is perhaps the most magnificent ruin in India. Before its wanton destruction at the hands of the infamous iconoclast Sikander Butshikhan (Breaker of Idols), it must have been, along with Konark in Orissa, the most luminous temple dedicated to the sun god Surya. Even in its ruins the majesty of its design, the huge monolithic stones used in its construction, the splendid proportions of the temple were clearly discernible. In the courtyard stood several gigantic earthen jars, used at one time to store grain after a plentiful harvest.

"How beautiful!" she said. "What it must have been like before it was destroyed!"

They sat on one of the huge stone pillars lying scattered in the compound.

"What shall we do?" she asked.

Ashok had not spoken all through the drive. He was wrestling with a deep inner conflict. Here was Sheila after all these months of longing and dreaming, so near and yet so absolutely out of reach.

"We mustn't let Ramesh know; he will be livid and I have already borne the brunt of it once."

"Tell me—what really happened between the two of you at school? He keeps talking about you, but never completes the story."

Ashok related the whole event, including the traumatic moment of that evening when his world had collapsed around him. By the time he finished both of them were weeping.

"Oh Ashok, Ashok, he is such an adorable man, but when his temper gets out of control he loses all sense of balance."

"Has he ever done it with you?"

"No, but I have seen him on the verge. Look at the way he exploded at that poor man in the restaurant. If he finds out that we have loved each other and have not told him, he could go complelely berserk."

"But he mustn't find out., Sheila. I need just another two or three days to decide. After that I will leave the hotel in any case, whether or not I ever go back to Delhi."

Sheila was startled. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that my life is coming to a critical turning point. Remember the last verse of Frost's poem:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence.
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less travelled by
And that has made all the difference."

Sheila put her hand softly on his. "Which road are you planning to take, Ashok?"

He did not withdraw his hand, but covered it gently with his other one.

"Sheila, I feel a deep spiritual impulse, which has became much stronger since I met Maharaj. I think I will renounce the world and join him. He knows Shiva and the way to Him, and I am ready to follow him to the ends of the earth. This life is no longer for me; my goal is at last within sight, it is the temple of Shiva."

For several minutes they were silent; alone in that great massive ruin, surrounded by the huge valley behind it.

"Yes," said Sheila at last. "I think that is what you must do if you feel so strongly about it."

Ashok looked at her gratefully.

"We must be getting back," she said, "or Ramesh will start becoming suspicious. He has such a volcanic nature for so lovable a man."

When they got back to the Pahalgam Club it was already getting dark. They found Ramesh sitting in the garden with a whisky and soda in his hand, in a foul mood.

"This bloody place," he shouted, "they have the cheek to call it a golf course. It's just a rugged hill with holes drilled in it every few hundred yards. I lost four balls before I called it a day.'

"You can't compare it to Gulmarg where the course is of international standard, Ramesh."

Ramesh pulled a long face. "What took the two of you so long?" he said irritably. "I've been sitting alone here for hours."

He had evidently been drinking heavily too, as his voice was louder than usual and his step unsteady as he got out of his chair and they moved to the dining room.

Ashok said, "Martand's a long way away, you know."

"Did you like it, darling?"

"Oh yes," said Sheila. "The most marvellous place I've seen, though Ashok says the Shiva temple is even better."

"I must get the two of you up there," said Ashok, "if it's the last thing I do."

"It probably will be," Ramesh growled. "Now let's get some dinner and go to bed. We'll leave for Srinagar after breakfast. Remember, tomorrow is our last day in Kashmir and we are booked back to Delhi on Monday."

8

That night Ashok dreamt. He was always a prolific dreamer, often going through several full-length episdoes in one night, and Swamiji had told him to watch his dreams, especially the vivid ones that are still remembered after one wakes up. Such dreams, Swamiji had said, give us clues into the true state of our inner life which the conscious mind very often suppresses. It often needed the help of a skilled teacher to read the dream symbols correctly, and Ashok had recorded and sent several of his dreams to Swamiji who had returned them with his deeply perceptive comments.

In the dreams that night in Pahalgam, with the sound of the Lidder flowing close by, Ashok found himself on the banks of a huge, untamed river. It seemed to be flowing across a vast plain, and he came upon it without any warning as he was walking alone in some sort of a desert. He looked around, but there was no sign of a bridge or boat. He wondered how he was ever going to cross it, and he felt a sense of panic that he might be trapped there forever.

Suddenly he saw two figures coming along the bank towards him, one of them much larger than the other. They were conversing deeply, and as they neared he found, to his surprise, that they were Maharaj and Madan. He could see Maharaj striding along in his ochre robe, his hair blowing up behind him, forming a sort of golden halo against the light. Madan was dressed in white, and moved with easy elegance along-side his master. They walked past him as if he wasn't there, and though he tried to call out to them no words escaped his lips.

As soon as they passed him, they disappeared. Ashok was distraught. He ran down along the bank of that huge torrent calling out to them aloud, but they had vanished without a trace. Ashok felt a sense of loss and sadness so deep that he threw himself on the ground and broke into tears. The moment he did this he felt something brush his back and, jumping up with a start, saw the great golden eagle that he had noticed at 'Harvan' a few days earlier. The eagle circled around him and flew off as if asking Ashok to follow. After what seemed to be an interminable run stumbling through the stones and boulders that littered the river bank, Ashok suddenly saw what looked like a narrow bridge of many-coloured lights—rather like a rainbow—going across the river in a great arc. Maharaj and Madan, continuing their conversation, were already half way across the bridge.

Before Ashok could follow them he heard a vehicle approaching, throwing up clouds of dust as it neared. It was a Land Rover; Ramesh was driving and Sheila was in the front seat, while in the back were a pair of labradors, one black and the other yellow. They were evidently trying to say something to him, but their words made no sense, as if they were speaking in some unknown tongue. Ashok dropped the knapsack he was carrying, swiftly stripped until he was entirely naked, and raced towards the bridge of light. It was getting fainter. Maharaj and Madan had almost reached the other side. The great bird dived past him as if urging him on. He felt the chill of the water, heard the sound of the great river crash in his ears and, with all the strength left in him, jumped towards the disappearing bridge.

"Wake up, Ashok, wake up." Ashok heard the voice as if coming out of anaesthesia. For a moment he was not sure whether he was awake or asleep. Then he felt Ramesh's hand ruffle his hair. "Wake up! For God's sake, what's the matter?"

Ashok shook his head and looked at his watch. It was three in the morning.

"Ramesh, what are you doing here?"

"You were shouting so much in your sleep that we thought you were dying or something. We're next door, and Sheila sent me to investigate. Are you sure you're all right?"

"I ... I'm sorry to have disturbed you, Ramesh. I must have had one of my vivid dreams. Really, I'm quite all right. Many thanks for coming, though."

On an impulse Ramesh bent down and kissed him on the forehead.

"Good night, Ashok," he said. He switched off the light as he went out.

Ashok lay back in his bed, touched by Ramesh's gesture, pondering over the dream he still vividly recalled. The impact was quite clear to him even without Swamiji's interpretation. He had to shed entirely his present way of life and follow Maharaj if he was ever to cross the turbulent river of Time, flowing relentlessly and eternally. He would have to give up his job, his friends and his association with Ramesh and Sheila. And he had to do it soon, or the bridge would disappear and he would be left for God knows how many more lifetimes in the future.

They left for Srinagar at about ten, planning to get into the hotel by one. Ashok needed one final meeting with Maharaj before he took the plunge, and hoped that he would be able to get away to the Ashrama in the afternoon. As if reading his mind, Ramesh cut in.

"This afternoon we are having high tea with the Rustomjees. You must come along, Ashok."

"No, Ramesh, I have to go and see Maharaj. Besides, who are the Rustomjees? I don't even know them."

"Don't know the Rustomjees, how is that possible?" said Ramesh. "They are an elderly Parsi couple who have become an institution in Srinagar. They've lived here for God knows how many decades, run a sort of departmental store that sells everything under the sun, and are such good people that they have endeared themselves to Kashmiris and non-Kashmiris alike. My father used to supply some goods to them and they became good friends. I called them before we left Srinagar and they were delighted. They saw me last when I was a teenager and are dying to see how I look and how my wife looks."

"OK. OK. You two carry on, but please leave me out. I really have to see Maharaj."

"Out of the question," said Ramesh with an air of finality. "You can go and see your precious Maharaj after tea."

Ramesh was sitting in the front of the taxi as he always liked doing. An excellent driver himself, he hated taking the back seat even if he wasn't driving. Ashok looked helplessly at Sheila. Ramesh caught his glance.

"It's no use appealing to Sheila, Ashok. I must get you to meet the Rustomjees. They are so sweet and such excellent company. Her English is a little wonky, but promise that you won't laugh at it."

"All right, I'll come," said Ashok, "but I will have to leave soon after tea and get up to the Ashrama before it gets dark. What time is it?"

"Five o'clock, and when Mr. Rustomjee says five that's exactly what he means."

Ashok had a strange feeling of *deja vu*, as if all this had happened before in a dream. Perhaps it was a premonition that in some way the Rustomjees were a small but vital part in his new life. Whatever it was, the feeling persisted until they finally reached the hotel. After a quick but excellent buffet lunch Ashok excused himself and went off to his room, promising to meet in the foyer at a quarter to five.

Ramesh looked at the retreating figure, then turned to Sheila.

"I really can't understand this guy," he said, "though I've known him now ever since we were boys. What's his problem, why can't he stick to his job, get married and live happily ever after?"

"Happiness means different things to different people, Ramesh. He is evidently deeply committed to the spiritual quest, and everything else has become for him essentially meaningless."

"Did he tell you that?"

"Yes, in so many words. He also told me about the school incident, Ramesh. I managed with great difficulty to get it out of him. He was very reluctant to speak of it."

Ramesh was silent for a long while. "What a terrible thing for me to do," he said at last. "And I loved him more than I would have my own brother."

"Love and hate are both strong emotions, Ramesh, and the dividing line between them is much thinner than we realise. It was your very love for him that brought about such a violent reaction."

"Well, thank God I've found him. I thought I would never see him again for the rest of my life. Sheila, don't you think it was a fantastic coincidence that he was on the same plane as us?"

"Yes, indeed," said Sheila, "more fantastic than you can imagine." The words were out of her mouth before she realised their implication.

"And what do you mean by that?"

"Nothing except that we booked at the last moment and were not sure of our seats till we got to the airport, remember?"

"Of course. Well, let's get a nap before we go off to the Rustomjees. That's really going to be fun."

They reached the Rustomjee home exactly at five. The taxi left them on the main road, from where they walked up to along the Bund, the embankment along the Jhelum river that had over the years become the most fashionable shopping area in town. They walked along for about two hundred yards passing hordes of tourists crossing the shops, until they came to a sign: "J. Rustomjee: General Merchant".

"This is it," said Ramesh as he rang the doorbell. It was flung open and the Rustomjees were there to enfold them in their arms.

"Dear, dear boy, you look exactly like your father. Doesn't he, Shirin?"

"Yes, exactly," said Mrs. Rustomjee, a voluminous, comfortable woman in a Parsi sari. "And this beautiful woman must be your bride."

"Yes, this is Sheila."

"How beautiful, with a peaches and milk complexion."

"Cream," said Mr. Rustomjee as they moved into the living room. Ashok was trailing behind.

"Oh Uncle and Aunty, this is my dear friend Ashok Singh. We were at school together."

"Welcome, welcome," said Mr. Rustomjee. "Did the three of you come up together then?"

"Yes," laughed Ramesh. "It was just a coincidence. We ran into each other on the plane."

They settled down in the roomy Kashmiri wicker sofas covered with the famous local embroidery. The furniture and lamps were all Kashmiri walnut, the carpets and local durries known as *namdahs* were a delight, and the shelves were full of Kashmiri silverwork and jade.

"What a beautiful room," said Ashok. "It looks almost like a Kashmiri emporium."

"Thank you. We've been living here now since long before the three of you were born, so we have collected a lot of Kashmiri art objects. They are such superb artisans. I must get Shirin to show you her collection of Kashmiri shawls one day. We pack them up for the summer and open them in autumn."

Tea was served out of a large silver Kashmiri samovar. It was delicious. Ashok had never tasted anything like it before.

"This is the way tea should be prepared," said Mr. Rustomjee. "No milk, only some saffron, almonds and sugar. We use green tea, of course."

Mrs. Rustomjee chattered away without a break. The conversation turned to politics, and to a figure who was becoming increasingly prominent in political life.

"I can't stand the man," said Mrs. Rustomjee. "He is not only a crook, but is mad as a hat."

"Hatter," said Mr. Rustomjee.

"What do you mean, 'hatter'? That's exactly what I said."

"No, you didn't; you said he was mad as a hat."

"Well, hat or hatter, what difference does it make? He is mad, that's the point."

"What do you think of his wife?" Sheila interjected.

"Can't stand her too," said Mrs. Rustomjee. "She gets on my nerve."

"Nerves," said Mr. Rustomjee, looking to the heavens for help.

At this point a Kashmiri waiter came in with plates loaded with pastries, sandwiches and a delicious local short bread known as *kulchas*. As they began tucking in, the doorbell rang.

"That must be Akhilan," said Mr. Rustomjee as he made for the door.

Ashok's heart began beating so fast that he thought everyone could hear it.

"Who's Akhilan?" he asked casually.

"The son of another dear friend. He was in town, so I thought it would be nice for all of you to meet."

Ashok felt a sense of impending doom. He glanced at Sheila, but she seemed not to have noticed. They heard Akhilan at the door, warmly greeted by the Rustomjees. He then entered the room. From the entrance Ashok and Sheila were immediately visible, while Ramesh was slightly to one side. The moment he saw Ashok, Akhilan bounded toward him.

"Ashok, Ashok Singh! It is you, after all! I thought I recognised you at the restaurant. How marvellous to see you here after those years in London." Then his eyes fell on Sheila, who had turned white as a sheet.

"And you too, Sheila. We all knew the two of you would be married one day. You were so much in love with each other. Congratulations, congratulations, how is the honeymoon going?"

For a long while there was dead silence, broken at last by Ramesh whose face had become quite red. He slapped his plate down on the table, upsetting one of the tea cups, got up and strode out of the house, slamming the door behind him. For a moment everyone was too stunned to speak. Then Sheila and Ashok both jumped to their feet and literally ran after him.

Akhilan was taken aback.

"Did I say something wrong?" he asked.

"I think you have upset the apple basket," said Mrs. Rustomjee.

"Cart," said Mr. Rustomjee.

"Nonsense, have you ever seen anyone selling apples from a cart?" Mrs. Rustomjee countered.

A glazed look came over Akhilan's eyes as he slumped into the chair Ramesh had just vacated.

9

By the time they reached, the bund, Ramesh had disappeared. They ran frantically towards the main road where the taxis were parked, but there was no sign of him there also.

"He must have gone back to the hotel," said Sheila. Ashok took both her hands in his and looked straight into her eyes.

"Sheila, this is it. I will go up to Maharaj and will leave a letter at the Ashrama with Madan. I am sure Ramesh will come looking for me, but don't worry. In the temple of Shiva I am safe. But what about you?"

"I'll be all right, Ashok. I'll take a taxi back to the hotel and see whether I can calm him down."

"He won't hurt you in any way, will he?"

"No, that would be against his Punjabi machismo. But he might try and assault you, Ashok."

"Don't worry. In any case, it won't be the first time," said Ashok with a wry smile. "Goodbye, Sheila, and may Lord Shiva bless you and Ramesh."

For a long moment they looked into each other's eyes. Both of them knew that this was the final farewell. Then they got into separate taxis. Sheila asked the driver to take her to the Palace Hotel, while Ashok asked for Nehru Park. The sky had darkened since they arrived for the tea party, and a few drops of rain had begun to fall.

Ramesh's head was bursting. Clearly both Sheila and Ashok had been lovers and had deliberately misled him. They must have been in touch before coming up to Kashmir, and Ashok must have deliberately timed his visit to coincide with theirs. In his white rage he lost all ability to think calmly. As soon as his taxi reached the hotel he asked the driver to wait and ran up to his room. His service revolver was locked inside his suitcase. Quickly he unlocked it, took the revolver out and, after checking that it was loaded, put it in the inside pocket of his coat. He then ran back to the porch, got into the taxi and asked the driver to take him to the Mountain of Shiva. He was sure that Ashok had gone there.

As the car drove out of the hotel, Sheila's taxi drove in. But by now it was dark and rainy, so they did not notice each other. Sheila went straight to the reception and asked about Ramesh.

"He just ran in, took his key, and ran out again in five minutes," said the receptionist.

"Did he leave the key as he went out?"

"No, he must have taken it out with him."

Sheila's heart sank. She knew that Ramesh would be wild with anger, but she had not reckoned on his going out again so soon. She walked slowly on, through the long corridors and into the main lounge known as the Gold Room. There was no one there; full-length portraits of the former rulers of Kashmir, resplendent in their jewels and turbans, looked out at her from the walls. She sat down in one of the huge chairs, her mind in a turmoil. The two men she loved most were at this very moment probably locked in physical combat. She was not a particularly religious woman and, having been brought up in an Arya Samaj family, she did not have the comfort of leaning upon a personalised deity. But at that moment she prayed as hard as she could to Shiva, on whose mountain Ramesh and Ashok were both going to meet.

By the time Ramesh reached the Ashrama it was already almost dark. He knocked roughly on the door, which was opened by Madan. Ramesh pushed him aside and stepped into the room to see if Ashok was there. Seeing no one he shouted at Madan.

"Where's Ashok?"

"Up at the temple with Maharaj."

Ramesh glared at Madan as he stomped out of the Ashrama and went up on the path leading to the temple. He had not realised how long it would be, and swore every time he tripped on a stone. After what seemed an eternity he finally reached the foot of the temple.

From within he heard the sound of Sanskrit being chanted so melodiously that, even in his disturbed frame of mind, he paused for a while. Then his rage returned, and without taking off his shoes he began climbing the steps shouting, "Ashok, where the hell are you? Come out and face me like a man."

By now it was quite dark, and lightning was cracking ominously in the sky, revealing the steps in spasmodic fragments. When he reached the great bell he shouted again.

"Ashok, come out, why are you hiding in the temple?"

A man emerged in the doorway of the temple with a kerosene lamp in one hand, but it was not Ashok, it was someone much bigger. Ramesh took out his revolver and pointed it at the figure.

"Whoever you are, go back in and send Ashok out."

The man ignored him and started coming down the steps. He looked gigantic, his beard and flowing hair dimly illuminated by the lantern, giving him a surreal appearance.

"Stop!" shouted Ramesh above the thunder. "Stop or I will shoot."

The figure kept descending. There was a tremendous flash of lightning which illuminated the huge figure in an ochre robe. Ramesh was momentarily stunned, and in that flash, Maharaj's hand swept out and hit him sharply on the wrist, sending his service revolver flying from his grasp and clattering harmlessly down the steps.

With a cry of anger and pain Ramesh fell back, but before he could recover Maharaj was upon him and had pulled him up by the lapels of his coat. Ramesh was a strong man, but in Maharaj's hands he seemed like a puppet. Towering over Ramesh, Maharaj held him in an iron grip. For the first time in his life a tremor of awe went through Ramesh as he struggled to get free. Maharaj looked straight into his eyes and then spoke with an intensity that pierced through Ramesh's consciousness.

"Your unreasoning anger has already scarred Ashok for life, and I will not let you do it again. Your suspicions are totally unfounded. Now go down the way you came and pick up your revolver. Sheila is waiting anxiously at the hotel, go to her."

While he had been speaking the lightning played almost continuously on his face. Ramesh tried desperately to muster up his strength, his courage, his anger, but confronted by those icy blue eyes he felt totally powerless.

Maharaj thrust the lantern into Ramesh's hand and said, "Now go, and may Lord Shiva be with you."

Then he turned on his feet and walked back into the temple. The sonorous Sanskrit chanting began again.

Ramesh stood in a sort of stupor, watching Maharaj disappearing into the shrine. Then, as if in a dream, he started walking down the steps. His revolver was lying on the platform. Ramesh put down the lantern, bent to pick up the revolver and put it in his pocket.

As he straightened up he saw a small figure in white standing near him.

Madan picked up the lantern and said simply, "Follow me."

They traversed the path in silence. At last they reached the Ashrama where Ramesh's taxi was still waiting. As he got in Madan handed him a letter.

"Ashok said to give you this."

He turned and walked back to the hut. Ramesh got into the taxi. "Back to the hotel."

As they drove, Ramesh tried very hard to gather his thoughts. He was still disoriented. His hand where Maharaj had struck it was still hurting, so he knew it was not all a dream. But apart from that he was unable to focus his mind. Flashes of lightning, those icy blue eyes, the words resounding in his ears— "Now go, and may Lord Shiva be with you."

By the time he returned to the hotel he had composed himself enough to pay the taxi driver. As he walked in the receptionist handed him a key.

"Mr. Ashok Singh said to give you this. Mrs. Kapur is waiting for you in the Gold Room."

Ramesh walked on. As soon as Sheila heard his footsteps she ran out into the corridor, and gasped when she saw him white as a sheet.

"Ramesh, are you all right? What happened? Where's Ashok?"

Ramesh simply shook his head.

"He's all right. Let's go up to his room."

They went on in silence. Ramesh unlocked the door and switched on the lights. Ashok's packed suitcase was lying on the bed. Ramesh sat down heavily in one of the chairs.

Ramesh pulled the letter from his pocket and tore open the envelope.

"Read it," said Sheila, "read it aloud."

"Dear Ramesh:

"For the second time you have misunderstood and wronged me. Why this has to happen I do not know. Perhaps there is some fatal flaw in our psychic relationship that makes it inevitable. Anyhow, here are the facts. Please do not do me the further injustice of disbelieving them.

"Sheila and I were together at the London School of Business Management. We became acquainted there, and gradually our feelings for each other deepened. I was deeply in love with her and wanted to marry her. What her feelings were I cannot say for certain, but it is likely that she reciprocated my sentiments.

"One day we went together to a play—My Fair Lady. I loved every moment of it, but noticed that she was looking very sad. On emerging from the theatre I took her suddenly in my arms and kissed her—the first and only time that we ever did so. She broke into tears and said that she had just received a letter from her father saying that her marriage had been arranged and that she must return to India at once.

"I protested, urged her to write and say that she would marry me, but she was adamant. She said she must obey her father's wishes, and added that she was his only child and he must have chosen well. She left London five days later. I did not see her again until you introduced her to me on the plane to Srinagar."

Ramesh turned the page and looked at Sheila, who sat transfixed in her chair staring into nothingness. He read on:

"From the moment I saw Sheila and realised she was your wife I was torn between the instinct to tell you and the desire to spare you any unpleasantness. I have always been very fond of you, and seeing you after so long, the last thing I wanted to do was to upset your honeymoon. Also, Ramesh, I was aware of the extremely volatile and deeply suspicious streak in your nature. Hence I desisted from saying anything, specially as I was not sure whether Sheila herself would tell you.

"I wanted to avoid you, but you insisted on my joining you at meals and excursions. Finally, on that outing to Pahalgam, I thought I should discuss the matter with Sheila. Circumstances placed us together alone for over two hours. During this time, Ramesh, you *must* believe me, our sole topic of conversation was a person whom both of us love more than anyone else in the world, Ramesh Kapur. Sheila is as pure and lovely in spirit as she is in form. Whatever else you may do, never let unreasoning jealousy or suspicion come between you.

"As for me, you know that even at school I was always looking for something, searching for some inalienable certainty in this stifling world, for some invincible reality in the midst of these shadows that surround our existence. Well, I think I have found at last what I was seeking—at the Mountain of Shiva. I now know why I came to Kashmir. Before I could plunge seriously into the spiritual quest I had to work out my relationship with the only two people I have ever loved—you and Sheila. Although you misjudged me again, Ramesh, I feel no resentment any longer, only a deep love rising from the recesses of my heart. And for Sheila also my love has matured into something deeper, a blessing and benediction for her future happiness and for yours.

"It is said that one first sees the spiritual light that one seeks reflected in the eyes of another man. I have seen it in Maharaj, Ramesh, and am going in quest of Shiva. It will be essentially an internal journey, but I will also travel the Himalayas with Maharaj. I do not think we will meet again in this lifetime, but my love will be with you always and with Sheila. May your relationship blossom like the rare saffron on the fields of Pampur, and may its fragrance fill your lives till the end of your days.

"I have settled the hotel bill and packed my luggage. When you and Sheila return to Delhi tomorrow please take my belongings with you and make a trip to Pradhanpur as soon as possible so that you can give them to my mother. Also give her my love and tell her not to grieve for me, as I am on the path to a beatitude that far transcends material welfare.

"Aum Namah Shivaya.

"Always your loving,

"ASHOK."

Tears were streaming down Ramesh's face as he ended reading the letter. Sheila put her arm gently around his neck and kissed him on the cheek.

He sat for a long moment in a state of near collapse. Then he pulled himself together and started to rise.

"We must go to him."

"No," said Sheila. "We have lost him now. He loved both of us, and both of us loved him. But we still have each other." They reached out and clasped hands, their eyes filled with tears.

Miraculously, the storm had passed, leaving the sky clear and glittering with a million stars. From Ashok's bedroom window the temple was clearly visible, dominating the night sky as if it were the glowing face of Lord Shiva himself. A crescent moon had arisen and stood suspended just to one side of the temple, completing the illusion. Suddenly the silence was broken by the sound of a great bell ringing out in the distance. The majestic cadence wafted over the lake until it enfolded the whole valley in its embrace.

THE
MOUNTAIN OF SHIVA

Set in Kashmir, and dealing essentially with the spiritual quest, *The Mountain of Shiva* is not only a good story but has profound undertones which would be of great interest to the discerning reader. In spelling out Adi Sankara's philosophy as expressed in his works, a dialogue is introduced in the novel between a preceptor and an aspirant — "What is it that you seek?" "I seek to redeem the glowing promise of the Upanishads, to achieve the state where all sorrow and strife cease and where shines the eternal light of bliss and certitude." "You seek well. You seek what is your birthright," answers the master.

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